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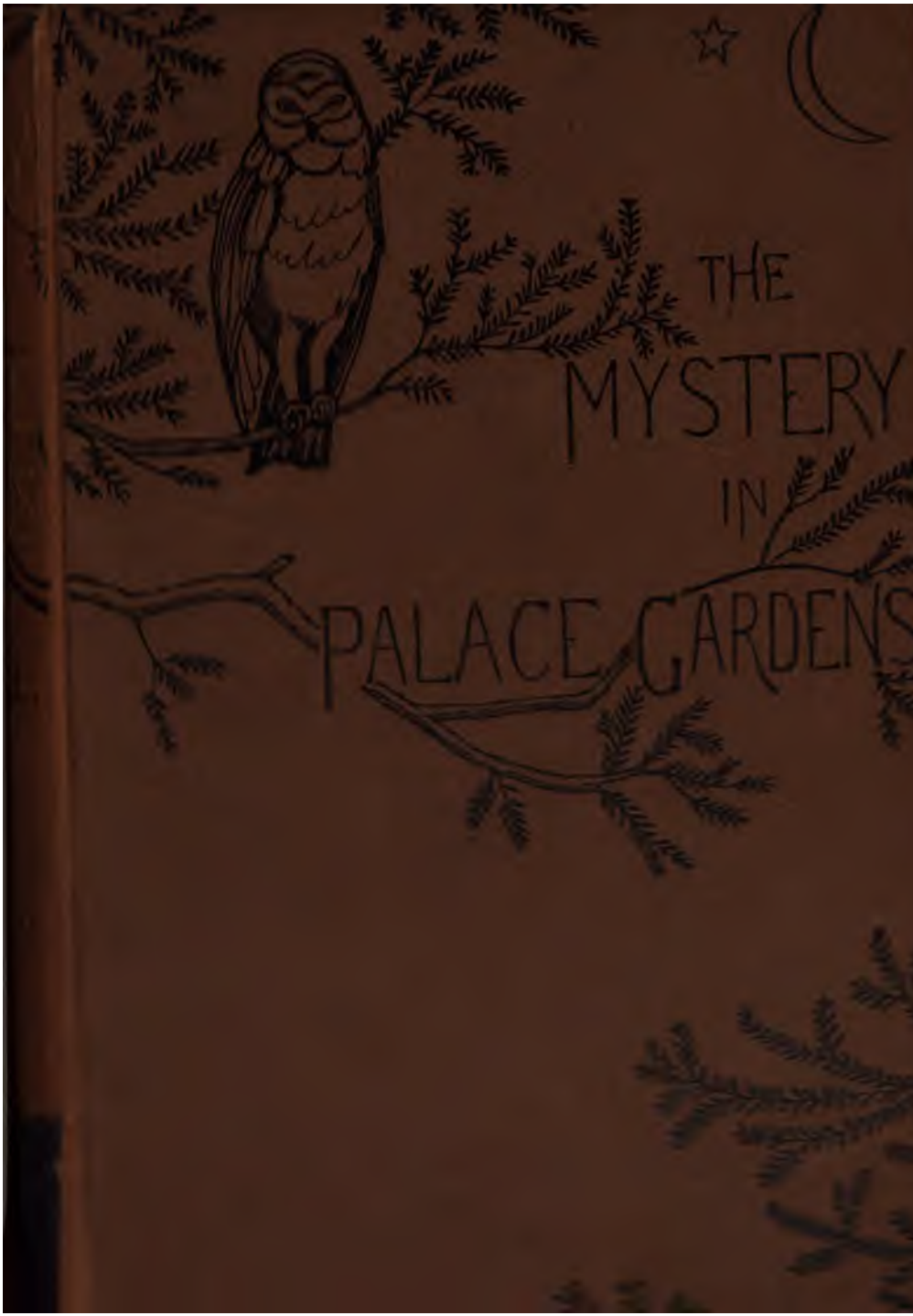
THE
MYSTERY
IN
PALACE GARDENS

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THE

MYSTERY IN PALACE GARDENS.

A Novel.

BY

MRS. J. H. RIDDELL,

AUTHOR OF 'GEORGE GEITH,' 'CITY AND SUBURB,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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THE

MYSTERY IN PALACE GARDENS.

CHAPTER I.

STORMY WEATHER.

A DULL gloomy day, one of a species so indigenous to the British climate that it springs up at all seasons, and apparently under conditions of weather most unfavourable to its development.

The previous evening had been lovely, sinking after a pensive sunset sweetly into the arms of night; no chill winds sweeping amongst the trees in Kensington, and strewing the ground with leaves still green; no driving rain, no ominous storm clouds: a warm, fine, kindly evening for the time of year—one that had tempted the Moffats out in the light of a young moon, and kept them sauntering up and down the terrace even after Mr. Woodham, who

dined at Holyrood House, said it was getting so late he really must go.

And now, if Nature had been in its coffin, a thicker and darker pall could scarcely have covered its fair face.

Rain had fallen plentifully in the night, and the earth was sodden and soaked with wet. The late flowers were beaten down to the ground; the wind moaned mournfully without and within the house. Everything looked a good mud-colour; the very grass of Kensington seemed to have a layer of brown over its green. The solitary cow drooped its head disconsolately; a horse came and laid his neck over the railings dividing the Gardens from Holyrood House, and gazed mournfully around.

It was a miserable day. The rain had given over, so that even the excitement of hearing it pattering on the terrace or seeing it drive across the landscape was denied to the two girls keeping house that forenoon in Palace Gardens.

Edwina, with a fur cloak round her shoulders, lay back in an easy-chair drawn up close to the fire, reading a novel which she pronounced to be—and

with some justice, perhaps—the most wearisome book that was ever written.

In such weather Edwina never showed to advantage in the home circle. She was more wretched than the day, more dull than the skies, more trying than the oppressive atmosphere. She did not mind frost, or even snow; she liked an easterly wind; she delighted in the wild northern blasts, and was amiable in a tropical heat which might have proved too great even for a negro; but rain, fog, damp—under these, whether they came severally or collectively, Edwina succumbed. It was of no use speaking to or trying to amuse her, or remarking that it might be finer to-morrow. For the time being she was inconsolable. Mental resources she had none; and accordingly the moment physical influences were against her, down she sank into a Slough of Despond from which it required something a vast deal stronger and more exciting than her usual surroundings to extricate her.

Rachel knew this so well, her experience of Edwina's depression and irritability was so long, that she never now tried expostulation or remonstrance;

never suggested practising this duet, or trying that song; never asked her sister's opinion of a new design, or strove to interest her in any one of the score of trifles that make up the sum-total of most young girls' lives.

As a rule, it was best to let the fit have its way; the absence of all opposition prevented any of those ebullitions of temper which proclaimed Edwina her mother's own child. Sometimes when Lady Moffat herself was out of sorts on these occasions the pair exasperated each other to such a degree, there occurred sundry passages of arms that filled the elder girl with unspeakable shame and terror. Then would Edwina go to her own room, and, banging the door and locking it securely, betake herself to bed, no matter what time of day it chanced to be; whilst Lady Moffat would transfer the burden of her wrath to her firstborn, and pour out on Rachel's devoted head those vials of wrath the younger girl was so apt to fling back undutifully in the face of her parent.

Let who would be wrong, Rachel never proved in the right; she always came in for the heat and the

burden of whatever domestic quarrel or domestic trouble might be on hand.

'Poor scapegoat!' Edwina often exclaimed, coming upon her crying as though her gentle heart would break; but her sympathy evaporated in words; though Heaven only knows, lacking the ensample of that sweet unselfish nature, what the strong, handsome, hoydenish, boyish girl would have grown up.

'Why don't you say something, Rachel?' Edwina at length asked pettishly, closing her book and turning her head to the window, close beside which the elder sister sat quietly at work.

All was dull and gray without, but her face wore a quiet smile. As her needle flew in and out she was all unconsciously entwining with the pattern some tracery of her own future—fair fancies such as girls weave, dreams of the hereafter gentle spirits sometimes live to find realised.

'Why don't you speak? Your best friend—if you have one, which I very much doubt—could not certainly call you a lively companion.'

'I thought you wanted to finish that novel,' explained Rachel meekly.

'Novel, indeed! I wish the author were here; I would give him a piece of my mind he would not like, I fancy!'

'She,' amended the other, looking at her work approvingly; it was a pretty triumph for a needle to have achieved, and the girl, perhaps, approved of it as well as the fanciful future she had stitched in with it.

'She!' repeated Edwina, turning to the title-page. 'O, so it is! Well, *she*, then, Miss Particular; you are dull enough, gracious knows, but you are better than this trash.'

'Thank you, Dwina,' said Rachel, laughing.

'I cannot think what possessed papa to drag me away from Scarborough in that erratic fashion,' went on the other. 'It was not very lively there, except for mamma and that odious Miss Banks; but in comparison to this—' and comprehending Kensington Gardens, Holyrood House, the whole parish, and her present existence in one wave of her hand, Edwina left the utter monotony of the position to her sister's imagination.

'It is very lonely for you, poor dear,' acquiesced Rachel.

'Indeed it is. You see,' went on the frank young lady, with a portentous yawn, 'you are not much.'

'I am afraid I am very little,' agreed Rachel, and she meant the remark fully; for, save in the eyes of Sir John, her quiet ways had failed to find favour.

'Of course I do not mean that you are not as good as gold,' explained Edwina.

'And as heavy; I understand, dear,' said her sister.

'O, if you are going to be cross and disagreeable—'

'I, Dwina!' and the girl laid down her work and looked towards the fireplace in amazement.

'No, I did not intend to say that,' cried Edwina, in a fit of compunction. 'I don't know what I intended, but it is dreadfully dull here; horribly, frightfully, fearfully, unspeakably dull!'

'I wish I could make it better for you,' said Rachel.

'But you can't, so there is no use in wishing. What news did Hal send you this morning?'

'Not much. Hal's *forte*, as you are aware, is not letter-writing.'

'Still he did write, and at considerable length, too; tell me all he said.'

'He said mamma was well, and Gilbert well, and Ralph well, and himself well; that mamma seemed to find Scarborough dull; that Lord Chesunt and Captain Battersley are gone, and that they all want to know what you did to offend his lordship.'

'O! he was offended. I *am* glad of that.'

Rachel looked at her sister with some curiosity.

'How did you manage it, Dwina?' she asked.

'You know he had been too ill, he said, or so Captain Battersley said, for some days to leave his room; and yet that unlucky morning when papa came down there he was on the beach, bath-chair and servant, looking about him, seeing what he could see. He was there when we returned from our sail, and made a remark to me I did not like about Mr. Lassils. He got as good as he gave, I can tell you. He won't meddle in my business again, I fancy, in a hurry.'

'But what *did* you say?' asked Rachel, in an agony of apprehension.

'Never you mind,' answered Edwina, resuming

her lounging position; for she had sat bolt upright whilst referring to this passage of arms. 'Go on; tell me more that Hal writes.'

'The weather has been rough there lately,' proceeded Rachel, after a moment's pause, 'and they have not been able to go out boating.'

'Yes; go on.'

'But they have had some pleasant rides in the neighbourhood.'

'Rachel, you are enough to provoke a saint. Doling out such scraps of information; let me read the letter for myself.'

'No; I am not going to show you my letters,' answered Rachel more firmly than usual.

In a moment Edwina was out of her chair and beside the window.

'Give me Hal's letter,' she cried, 'or I will never be friends with you again; never, never, never!'

'I would rather not give it you,' said Rachel.

'And I would rather you did; and you shall! Rachel, have I ever refused to show you anything? Give me that letter like a darling; give it to me like a dear.'

'I think you ought not to ask me, Dwina, when I tell you it would grieve me very much to do what you want.'

'I think I ought to ask you, for it grieves me very much not to get all I want.'

With a sigh Rachel produced her brother's epistle.

'You will see why I did not want you to read it, Dwina,' she said. 'I wish Hal would not write as he does.'

'Poor boy, what an awful scrawl!' exclaimed Edwina, as she pulled the enclosure out of the envelope, and began to read:

'"Dear Old Thing—" Well, I'm sure!' commented the girl. '"Dear Old Thing,—Thanks, ever so many, for your note and the needful. What a stunning girl you are! very different from the future Viscountess, who never can keep a sixpence to bless either herself or her friends with. Of course you know about the governor coming down so 'unexpected,' as the servants say, and the jolly row there was between him and the mater, who, between our-

selves, has been going it since we came here. There seems, so far as I can gather, to have been a deuce of a shindy about £ *s.* *d.* and other matters. He was quite right to whisk Eddy off with him. People were talking about her and the sickly-looking lord in a way that made me long to kick some fellow. By the bye, can you tell us what she said to Chesunt to make him so angry? We were not able to get it out of Battersley, but have heard indirectly his lordship declares the next time he takes the slightest notice of a pretty girl he will first make sure she has been brought up as a lady. Pleasant for us, isn't it? Lassils seems inconsolable at her departure. He was awful spoons; and I really think if the eighty thousand pounds had not been in the way, he would have stood his chance of getting 'No' from the governor. What he could see in her I'm sure I don't know; we are all agreed she is far too fast. We did not want her out with us that morning she dished her goose; but she would come. Lassils seemed to like it, though.

"The mater is well, but inconsolable for want of her dear toady; and Winter has been having a bad

time of it. We are all living in hopes the 'Banks and Braes,' as we call her, may soon return to cheer my lady up a little. Chesunt has gone, and Lassils is going. His fair charmer is expected in England, or has come; which is it? Sometimes I think she is a myth; so if you see a clerk from the War Office loafing around Palace Gardens, you had best lock Eddy up. All the rest of us are well. It has been too rough to go sailing; but we have had some good rides about the country. I wish you were here. It is a crying shame you never go anywhere.—Your loving brother,

"HAL MOFFAT."

'O, very well, Master Hal,' said Edwina, folding up this epistle, 'I am too fast, am I? and you wonder what people see in me. And you did not want to take me with you. Very well; just wait till you come wanting to borrow a sovereign next time, and you'll see whether you get it.'

'I don't think he would get it in any case, Dwina,' said Rachel, smiling. 'You are always as short of money as he is.'

'Well, perhaps I am,' answered Edwina, smiling too; and then she walked back to the hearth, and, laying her head on the mantelpiece, stood looking thoughtfully into the fire.

Rachel followed her, and, taking the letter from her unresisting fingers, tore it into very small pieces and threw them on the blazing coals.

'I ought not to have kept it at all,' she remarked —'not for a moment. Hal should not write about mamma in that way.'

'Pooh!' said Edwina. 'What does it matter? Every one must know she has not the sweetest temper in the world.'

'And to say that she and papa had quarrelled,' went on Rachel, pursuing her own train of thought.

'I have not the slightest doubt but they did. At the best of times she would provoke a saint, but since we went to Scarborough you can't imagine how much worse she has been. You should hear her rating Winter. She tried it with me, but I walked out of the room. If you had been there you would have come in for all of it.'

'Dwina, I do wish, dear—' Rachel was beginning, when the sound of a thundering double-knock resounded through the silent house.

'Hush!' said Edwina, holding up her hand.

'Who can it be?' marvelled Rachel; for they knew no one in town likely to call, and, indeed, were supposed to be absent from London.

Edwina stole to a door, not generally used, opening into a little side hall, and softly unclosing it, stood listening, her hand still raised to enforce silence on her sister.

'Mr. Lassils, I hope,' she said, in a whisper, parodying the well-known story of the sailor and the tracts. 'Mr. Woodham, I fear. Miss Banks, by—' and with a countenance expressive of the most extreme disgust she retreated from her position. 'Don't see her, Rachel,' she entreated. 'O, I knew that stupid Simonds would show her in! Tell him to say we are sick, dead, anything. There, now!'

'Miss Banks,' announced Simonds; and without leaving Edwina even the chance of retreat, that lady followed straight through the outer draw-

ing-room, where Simonds had meant to leave her, and entered the inner apartment, to which, when Lady Moffat was at home, she considered herself privileged.

'Well, dear, and how are you?' she began, shaking hands with Rachel, whom she would have kissed, only that she had never yet got upon terms of what she called 'real friendliness' with the young people in Holyrood House. 'I felt I must come round and have a peep at you. And how are you, Edwina?' she added, catching a glimpse of the younger sister again buried in her easy-chair. 'Have you got a cold?' she asked, glancing at the fur cloak and the girl's rueful expression of countenance.

Very ungraciously Edwina half rose from her seat and presented, or rather allowed Miss Banks to take, two of her fingers.

'You nasty rude little monkey, I should like to shake you,' thought the spinster; whilst Rachel, mortified, answered for her,

'No, she has not a cold. She is only out of sorts. She is always miserable on a wet day.'

'Like her mamma,' said Miss Banks genially.

'Mamma is not fond of rain either,' acquiesced Rachel.

'Mamma *hates* rain, and so do I,' amended Edwina, sinking back into her former position, and taking up the despised novel as armour defensive and offensive against Miss Banks' advances.

Perhaps it was because her sister treated the visitor with such scurvy politeness that Rachel exerted herself more than usual in order to place Miss Banks at her ease. Perhaps, also, there was something in the fact that for the first time she could speak freely and naturally without the fear of giving offence — a fear ever present when Lady Moffat chanced to be of the company. Whatever the cause, Miss Banks felt that she had never before seen the girl to full advantage, and she wondered more and more at the repugnance—for, indeed, it amounted to repugnance—which her mother seemed to feel towards her.

'I am going back to Scarborough to-morrow,' explained Miss Banks; 'so I called to-day that I might take back the latest news from Palace Gardens

with me, and also ask if you had any little parcel you wanted sent.'

'I think not, thank you,' said Rachel. 'Papa took charge of a little piece of lace I worked for mamma. Perhaps she showed it to you,' added the girl, with a certain nervous hesitation in her manner.

'O yes,' answered Miss Banks. 'Lovely, lovely; just like gossamer.' She had seen Lady Moffat rend it in pieces; but there was no need to tell Rachel how she had picked up a morsel and lamented over its destruction.

'And how do you think mamma really is?' asked the girl, after they had talked for a few minutes about Point and Mechlin and Spanish and other of the many laces she had studied so carefully at South Kensington. 'Do you think she is better; that Scarborough has benefited her as much as we hoped it would?'

'No, my dear, I don't,' said Miss Banks, who always said she was nothing if not candid (Mr. Lassils amended, 'worse than nothing always'); 'and to be quite frank with you—'

'Mamma is perfectly well. Do not let any one frighten you, Rachel,' interposed Edwina at this juncture, speaking without raising her eyes from her book. 'Mamma is as strong as I am, there!' and she snapped out the last word in fierce defiance of Miss Banks and all her words and statements.

Even Miss Banks was disconcerted by this sally. For a second she looked doubtfully at Rachel, who, blushing crimson, felt so ashamed she could not speak, and then proceeded with her unfinished sentence as though no remark had intervened.

'I am afraid she never will be quite strong till she leads a quieter life. It is natural,' added Miss Banks, 'that your dear mamma should feel reluctant to withdraw from society, which she so enjoys and so much adorns. It would be strange, indeed, if, after having mixed all her life in the world, she could immediately seclude herself from it; and, besides, her spirits are so high and her energy so great, that she fancies she can undergo any amount of fatigue with impunity.'

'She is most energetic,' murmured Rachel, as, indeed, was the case. If Lady Moffat had wished to

go anywhere, she would have risen from a sick-bed to accomplish her object.

'Yes; but you see,' went on Miss Banks argumentatively, 'that, though energy may carry a person through for a time, it will not bear the strain for ever. Your mamma has for years been visiting a great deal, keeping very late hours, receiving guests, taking but little repose, mental or physical—'

'Indeed, Miss Banks, you are mistaken,' interposed Rachel; 'we led a very quiet sort of life till we came here. Mamma scarcely ever went out, and was generally in bed at eleven. After we removed to Carlton Hill, indeed, she visited more; but we did not know many people even there.'

'All the more reason, then,' said the spinster, 'she should not begin to tax her constitution now. She is not strong, and she is not well. She cannot sleep; her nerves have got into an excited irritable state; her appetite is capricious, and her temper is less equable than it was. Before I left Scarborough I was trying to persuade her to go to Whitby. It is a nice quiet place, where she would be out of the way of visitors and gaiety; and I tell you candidly,

my dear, when I go back I intend to renew the attack till I get her away.'

'O, if you only could!' murmured Rachel, thinking of Sir John; while Edwina gave a contemptuous sniff, and curled up her pretty nose in confidence to the fire.

'It is so frightfully expensive living at an hotel, too,' continued Miss Banks. 'Of course it does not signify to your papa, I know; but still the bills appear to a poor body like myself, who has to consider a sixpence twice before I spend it once, something awful. There is nothing for the money either; nothing, I mean, really to see for it. Now nice quiet apartments, as I told your mamma, would be better in every respect. If I can but get her to follow my advice, I shall hope to bring her back quite well. You are certain there is nothing I can take with me? It does not matter how large the parcel. Think now, is there?' and Miss Banks put her head a little on one side, and looked at Rachel like a smiling Gorgon.

'Nothing, thank you,' answered Rachel, 'except my dear, dear love.'

'And you may give mine to Viscount Chesunt, if you like, Miss Banks,' added Edwina, looking at the spinster over her shoulder.

'You naughty, naughty girl,' said Miss Banks, 'to compromise us all as you did in that quarter! I felt quite thankful when I found your papa had carried you off. If you had stayed, we should have been forced to face such a storm.'

'I should not have cared for that,' answered Edwina defiantly. 'When a person is rude to me, I have a right to be rude to him;' and she returned to her book with a satisfied smile.

Miss Banks smoothed her gloves and shrugged her shoulders with a despairing and deprecating gesture; then she said to Rachel,

'I hear from a very dear friend of mine—indeed, I may say the dearest friend I have—that Mr. Lassils' *fiancée* is to arrive in England next week. Curiously enough, she is coming to Palace Gardens. People call that affair a romance. For my part, it seems to me most vulgarly practical. Two young persons who have never seen each other, and very likely till quite lately never even heard of each other,

are going to marry for the sake of one hundred and sixty thousand pounds.'

'Eighty,' corrected Edwina.

'I understood double that; but no doubt you are right,' said Miss Banks, adding in an audible whisper to Rachel, 'See how well informed she is. No matter, however, what the amount, it resolves itself into a mere affair of sale and barter. I call it dreadful! I really cannot bear to think of men and women being so mercenary.'

Edwina opened her mouth to speak, but shut it again without carrying out her intention.

'Do you know at all how such a thing happened to come about?' asked Rachel.

Nothing could have delighted Miss Banks more than this question. She knew everything connected with the matter; went into a history of the respective families; diverged from the main road of her narrative to give a biography of the testator who had left such an uneasy legacy behind him; relieved her tale with an account of some wonderful Australian digger, who had rescued father and daughter at the risk of his own life; and finished with a little back-

handed slap at Mr. Lassils, who would never, she said, marry any girl unless he could get a large *dot* with her.

'He is the most dreadful flirt I ever knew,' she said. 'The numbers of pretty creatures he has made love to! In fact, he says himself he cannot see a pretty woman and not fall in love with her. All the daughters rave about him; but the papas don't quite agree with them. They want to know something more of a future son-in-law than his handsome face and salary in the War Office. Papas are very tyrannical people sometimes, are not they, Edwina?'

No answer, only a disgusted silence behind the book.

By this time the rain, which, having slept late after its exertions on the previous night, was long in putting in an appearance, woke up, and began to make its presence known. Plash, plash, plash; sop, sop, sop; it was like the tuning-up of the fiddles in an orchestra—a drop now, a drip again; a light hurrying mist, like a bow drawn swiftly across the strings; a few heralding splashes, and then the overture began in earnest.

'Bless me,' cried Miss Banks, in a genuine panic; 'it is raining! How am I ever to get home?'

'We will send for a cab,' said Rachel.

'Ah, my dear, cabs cost money,' answered Miss Banks ruefully. 'I must walk; and of course I should not mind that, only I have not a waterproof or an umbrella, or—or—anything;' and the poor lady, who was indeed most lightly clad, got up and looked out at the sky with anything but a hopeful glance.

'Serve you right, you old horror,' muttered Edwina in confidence to her book. 'I hope you will get drowned.'

'I can lend you a thick shawl and an umbrella,' said Rachel. 'Pray sit down again. Have you had any luncheon? Yes; well, at least you must have a glass of wine. Will you ring, Edwina?'

Edwina rang a peal which might have waked the dead.

'If you will excuse me, Miss Banks,' said Rachel, after she had poured out the wine, 'I should like to run up and fetch the shawl myself. I know exactly where it is, and—and you will have a biscuit or some cake, won't you?'

There was a grim silence in the room while Rachel remained absent. Miss Banks made no attempt to break it, and Edwina would not.

The spinster sipped her sherry and ate some cake, and Lady Moffat's younger daughter turned over page after page of the book she held in a demonstrative and aggressive fashion.

Through the utter silence the rain was heard plainly coming down faster and faster, heavier and heavier. Miss Banks, looking out at the hopeless prospect, mentally anathematised all rich people, to whom such accidents did not matter—who could hire cabs and never miss the hire, buy new clothes and never count the cost. She had not dressed as she might have done merely to call at the Moffats, whom she now clearly understood were socially nobodies, and scarcely likely, even with her assistance, ever to become anybodies; but she had donned, if not her best attire, a nice gown and a good mantle to 'wait upon' Lady Griffin, who hated to see people 'wrapped up,' and resented the intrusion of a 'waterproofed creature' into her drawing-room.

Poor Miss Banks! Poor Miss Anybody, who

has to study the whims of those richer and grander than herself!

Presently Rachel came back, a shawl over her arm, an umbrella in her hand.

'How the rain is coming down, Miss Banks!' she said sympathetically, yet not, Miss Banks felt, with all the sympathy her position deserved. 'You cannot go out in that; pray wait a little longer! Let me give you another glass of wine.'

Miss Banks allowed her to do so. There was nothing indeed more singular about Miss Banks than the way she took wine.

Not appreciatively, not as if it did her the slightest good, or were the faintest gratification to her; but as part-payment of a *rôle* for which she was most inefficiently remunerated. She regarded dinners, luncheons, breakfasts, the driest sherry, the finest champagne, but as a miner in former days might the goods from a 'tommy-shop.' She would rather have had the money by far; as the money was not obtainable, she decided to take such value as she could get.

She sipped the second glass of wine, and ate

another piece of cake. Edwina still remained engrossed in her novel. Rachel hovered between Miss Banks and the window.

'I really must go now,' said Miss Banks, wondering whether Rachel would ask her to spend the day and stop for dinner.

'One moment, please,' entreated Rachel; 'let me see how it looks in the front.'

Presently she came back smiling.

'It does not rain quite so much now, I think,' she said, 'and this is a good thick shawl.'

'But how am I to get it back to you?' asked Miss Banks, who was in a mood to find difficulties where perhaps none really existed.

'Should you mind keeping it altogether?' asked Rachel, in some confusion, and with a pretty hesitation in voice and manner, as she wrapped the soft folds round Miss Banks' lean shoulders. 'You won't be vexed with me, will you? I should be so pleased, and I have never worn it, or opened this umbrella; I bought them both just before I went into Surrey, and the weather was so fine I had no occasion to use either. They are scarcely worth

offering, but still you may find them useful at Scarborough.'

Not a broker in the land could have appraised the value of goods more rapidly or correctly than Miss Banks, and already she had arrived at a true estimate of the cost of both articles thus offered to her.

'Thank you, dear,' she said heartily; 'I accept your kindness with the greatest pleasure, not merely because I really am in want of both a new wrap and a sound umbrella—mine got blown to pieces on the cliff the other day—but because of the charming way in which you offer your presents. I shall think of you every time I look at this shawl;' and she wrapped it a little closer round her. 'It is very good and nice and thoughtful of you, Rachel;' and then she walked up to the younger girl, who never lifted her head or changed her attitude.

'What is your book?' asked the spinster; 'it must be very interesting. I do not remember ever to have seen you so engrossed in a novel before.'

Edwina shut the book with a snap. 'What! are you going, Miss Banks?' she said, ignoring the

question, and rising with a certain cheerful alacrity which she intended to irritate, and which did irritate, the spinster. 'Won't you get very wet?'

In her turn Miss Banks did not reply to this remark; she just touched the girl's hand and said good-bye, and walked out of the room attended by Rachel, who would go with her to the door, spite of all remonstrances.

The rain, which had slackened for a short time, was now again coming down in torrents. In the hall stood Simonds, looking remarkably sour and respectable, armed with a carriage umbrella; drawn close up to the step was a cab.

'I sent for one,' said Rachel, in answer to Miss Banks' look of inquiry. 'I could not endure the thought of your walking home in such a deluge; papa would not have allowed it for a moment; and Simonds has settled with the driver, so that you need not wait a moment in the rain. Good-bye, Miss Banks; my dear love to mamma.'

'I *must* kiss you,' said Miss Banks; and for the moment she felt something as near gratitude as it was in her nature to experience. She had come to

Palace Gardens expecting nothing, and she departed from it the richer by two very useful presents. She had not been obliged to scheme to get them—they had come 'just like a blessing,' as some one puts such gifts—and she would reach home dryshod and without a spot of rain on her dress, and no fuss either about the matter. 'No; the girl is nice,' she considered; 'where in the world did Lady Moffat get such a daughter?'

Rachel went back to the inner drawing-room, and stood for a minute regarding the rain as it poured down into the garden and swept across Kensington. The disconsolate horse was seeking, poor beast, for some shelter under the shade of an elm-tree, the cow had disappeared from view; anything more wretched, more cheerless than the landscape could scarcely be imagined.

With a shiver the girl turned her eyes towards the interior of the room, and remarked,

'What a day! what a most miserable day!'

Edwina did not answer. She had not reopened her book, but sat, her eyes fixed on the fire, which by this time was low and dull.

'I should think,' went on Rachel, 'that if wet weather sets in, mamma would soon return home.'

There was not any actual necessity for a reply; at all events none came. It is difficult to talk without any assistance at all in carrying on a conversation, and Rachel accordingly gave up the endeavour, and resumed the work she had relinquished during Miss Banks' visit.

Silence in the room, silence only broken by the occasional fall of a cinder, by the beating of the rain against the windows, by the wet plashing on the terrace. Suddenly the stillness was broken by a different sound. Rachel could not believe the evidence of her senses. She sat with needle suspended and lips a little parted, listening.

Another interval of total silence, then the sound was repeated; there could be no mistake, it was a sob. In a second Rachel was by her sister's chair, kneeling on the rug beside her.

'Dwina, Dwina, what is the matter?' she asked; 'aren't you well?'

Edwina turned her head aside, and pushed the anxious questioner aside with an ungracious elbow.

'Go away, can't you? Leave me alone; get on with the work you are so fond of. You are just like the rest; you are as bad as any one.'

'What *have* I done?' cried poor Rachel, in dismay.

'What have you done?' repeated Edwina, sobbing and weeping now without the smallest restraint; 'what haven't you done? Taken sides with that odious woman against me, giving her shawls and things; and, O dear, how civil you were to her!'

'I did not mean to vex you; and then you were so dreadfully rude,' said Rachel, in extenuation.

'If you are going to be civil to all the people I am rude to, you will have enough to do,' retorted Edwina, her cheeks crimson, her eyes full of tears, her hair tossed, her frills rumpled, a pretty picture in her childish anger, yet a sad: storm-driven by passion, inheriting part of her mother's beauty, and part, alas, of her mother's temper—a wayward, selfish, unreasoning little girl.

'Dwina dear,' Rachel began.

'O, don't "Dwina dear" me,' interrupted her sister. 'I hate such hypocrisy.'

'If you mean that I do not love you, Dwina, you are mistaken,' said Rachel. 'I had no thought of vexing you. I hoped Miss Banks might induce mamma to live a little more quietly.'

'She, indeed! when she was always bringing people to see us.'

'And her dress did look so thin and unsuitable for wet weather; and she is poor, you know, dear, and every one says she has such a dreadful struggle, and is so devoted to her poor brother.'

'I know one person who says precisely the reverse,' answered Edwina. 'But whether she is poor or whether she is rich, whether she is kind to her brother or not, she has no right coming here to make mischief, saying such things about a man who has never injured her. If Mr. Lassils is going to marry a girl with eighty thousand pounds or with eight hundred thousand, what is it to her?' and Edwina fairly covered her face with her hands and cried openly, unrestrainedly.

For a moment Rachel remained looking at her in astonishment; then a sudden light breaking through the darkness, she said,

'What is it to you, Dwina? that is of more consequence. What is it to you?' she went on more earnestly, finding her sister vouchsafed no reply.

'Go away, Rachel. I wish you would leave me alone. Don't hold me, or I shall hurt you; I can't bear to be pawed, as I have told you a hundred times over.'

Rachel took her hands slowly from her sister's neck and clasped them loosely before her, but she did not otherwise alter her position.

'Is it possible—O, tell me, dear; you know you may trust Rachel—that you care for this—this Mr. Lassils?'

'And if I do, what then?' asked Edwina defiantly. 'I do care for him,' she went on recklessly; 'and that dreadful woman knows it, and knows he cares for me.'

'But if he is going to marry the heiress,' suggested Rachel, wondering blindly about this new and untoward combination of circumstances.

'He will marry her, I suppose, and there is an end of it,' snapped Edwina viciously.

'But don't you think, dear—'

'Now, Rachel, stop preaching. I am in no mood to listen to you. It is all very well for you to talk with whom everything is going smooth; you have your lover; just let mine alone, will you?'

'I have my lover!' repeated Rachel; 'what are you thinking about, Dwina?'

'How delightfully innocent we are! any one, to hear you, might fancy you never dreamt of such a thing.'

'And I never did,' said Rachel firmly, though her face was covered with blushes as she spoke.

'Never dreamt Mr. Woodham was in love with you?'

'No, indeed.'

'And you are not in love with him?'

'Most certainly not.'

'O, rubbish!' said Edwina; 'why, I saw it all the day after I came home. Go back to your work; you are very sly and demure, no doubt; but you can't deceive me.'

Rachel rose and half turned away; then she stooped, and, pressing a kiss upon her sister's forehead, walked slowly to the door and left the room.

She went up the broad staircase to that apartment which had proved such a refuge to her in many an hour of trouble, and, as she had done the first morning she ever entered the house, stood beside the window, looking wistfully over Kensington Gardens.

As she did so there came across her soul a dim sort of wonder as to the eyes with which in some vague distant day she might regard that prospect. A prophetic sense of impending disaster weighed down her heart, a feeling of coming trouble, of the advent of disaster even then on the road of life to meet her. All things seemed to have gone wrong since they entered the house. She remembered now the feeling of distaste she had conceived for it from the first moment she crossed the threshold; she recollected how wistfully she had turned to the idea of some city of refuge for herself in the midst of that wilderness of splendour. She gazed at the driving rain through a mist of unbidden tears. Her father vexed, her mother ailing, her sister unhappy, herself—ah, when she came to that she followed Edwina's example, and, sitting down on a low chair, buried her face in her hands and cried bitterly.

The weary day was drawing to its end, and the shadows of evening beginning to close, when the sound of the opening door startled her.

It was Edwina. She had come to beg pardon and to make up friends, she said, and she carried in her hand a cup of tea as a peace-offering.

'Drink it, dear; it will do you good,' she entreated; 'and you ought not to mind me, Rachel, because you know I have such a wretched temper, and I never mean really what I say. I am sure I ought not to speak crossly to you. When mamma is at home you get plenty of scolding.'

'Don't talk about that,' answered Rachel; and she put her arm round her sister's waist and drew that wayward sister's head to her tender heart.

Next morning, just before her departure for Scarborough, Miss Banks received a note and a little parcel.

'From Miss Moffat, ma'am,' said Niel.

'Something for my lady, I suppose,' thought Miss Banks, opening the envelope and reading.

'Dear Miss Banks,—I have been thinking that

you will want a good strong pin to fasten the shawl; it is so heavy. Will you be so kind as to accept the accompanying trifle? which I think may answer the purpose, and very much oblige, yours sincerely,

'RACHEL MOFFAT.

'P.S. Pray give my dear, dear love to mamma. I know that, now she is not very well, our chatter might tire her; but if she should wish to have Edwina or me with her, we would start at any moment. Will you tell her this if you think well?'

Miss Banks undid the parcel and beheld a couple of massive gold pins, and a gold chain connecting the two.

Her experienced eyes had no difficulty in deciding the value and genuineness of this gift.

'Upon my word, Miss Moffat,' she said; 'upon my word, you are quite princely in your generosity;' and she proceeded with her preparations, while quite a new plan of action was developing itself in her mind.

CHAPTER II.

'THOU ART THE MAN.'

LONDON society had returned to the English metropolis. If 'every one' was not in town, at least most persons had come up for the short season before Christmas. Seaside resorts had resumed their normal air of dulness; tourists had flocked back from the Continent; all the inland watering-places looked deserted; the upper ten thousand were either at their estates in the country or in their houses in the West-end streets and squares; almost without exception, the upper hundred thousand were back in town, to the great contentment of tradespeople and the satisfaction of country cousins, who liked to see the fine equipages and the fashionable ladies in the Park.

Lady Moffat was back, of course, likewise—certainly not very strong; more restless than ever; more irritable, were such a change possible, and yet

with a strangely subdued expression upon her face at times which filled Rachel with wonder.

Not that her mother gave her many opportunities for noticing her countenance. The dislike Lady Moffat had always entertained for her first-born seemed, during her absence, to have developed into actual abhorrence. That astute observer, Miss Banks, watching the pair with eyes that apparently were devoid of speculation, mentally remarked:

'She looks as if she both hated and feared the girl. I *must* find out what the mystery is in this household.'

But time passed on, and Miss Banks remained as wise as ever. She tried to pump Rachel, but the girl had nothing to tell her.

'Mamma was never very fond of me,' she confessed, in answer to a sympathetic remark on the part of the spinster. 'I do not know why; perhaps some day she may love me better. O Miss Banks, if I only knew how to please her!'

So far as Sir John was concerned, he certainly found an improvement in his wife. She seemed to have lost that sudden mania for visiting and being

visited; the trouble now was to get her to go out at all. The doctor said she wanted rousing, and Sir John was always proposing something which he hoped might effect that purpose. All in vain. For hours Lady Moffat would sit doing nothing, saying nothing; then perhaps starting up suddenly, she would throw a shawl over her head, and pace the terrace till it seemed as though she would with her restless feet wear out the very tiles.

'It is all on the nerves, my dear,' Miss Banks would say to Rachel. 'Don't take any notice of it.'

Miss Banks was much at Holyrood House in those days; even Sir John seemed glad of her presence. She acted as a sort of breakwater between the ocean of Lady Moffat's impatience and the rest of the household; and she was very good and kind to Rachel. Sir John felt grateful to her for that.

'If you do not soon go to hear Mr. Woodham preach, Sir John,' she said one evening, 'you will miss your opportunity. He is going to leave St. Theresa's.'

'Why?' asked Lady Moffat, with a sudden interest. She had never quite ceased cherishing the

hope of one day being mother to a viscountess; and though of late Miss Banks had thrown cold water on the project, she still cherished a belief Mr. Woodham might be secured for Edwina, and that he would some day succeed to the title.

'Can't agree with the vicar,' explained Miss Banks. 'I believe their views do not coincide; and it is whispered, besides, that Mr. Woodham preaches far too well to please his chief. A sermon of his about Elijah gave mortal offence, it seems, to that gentleman. At all events, he is going; so, Sir John, if you want to hear him, you really ought to lose no more time.'

'Well,' answered Sir John, 'I do want to hear him, and I should have gone long ago, only you know my opinions differ from his.'

'What can that matter?' said Lady Moffat.

'Not much, I admit,' he answered good-humouredly, willing to avoid a scene. 'Should you like to hear him, Mira?'

'Of course,' she answered.

'Then shall we go together next Sunday morning?' he asked.

'I don't think he preaches next Sunday morning,' said Miss Banks; 'but I will find out and let you know. Of course you are aware, Sir John, you must be temporarily divorced from your wife while in church. I mean,' she added, laughing at the surprise expressed in his face, 'you will not be allowed to sit together.'

'Well, we should have to separate if we went to a synagogue,' answered Sir John; and he continued talking till the fierce light had died away from his wife's eyes.

'Then you really will go?' said Miss Banks at last.

'O yes, we really will go,' answered Lady Moffat; and accordingly, upon the Sunday week following, they repaired to St. Theresa's.

Incredible though the fact may seem, Sir John Moffat had never before entered a Ritualistic church. In many respects he was, as Miss Banks said, 'sadly behind the times,' and a new fashion in religion had as little attraction for him as a new *mode* in female dress.

The old lights would have more than sufficed him had he only truly followed where they led.

He could scarcely understand, and he certainly felt no sympathy with, these new faiths, which seemed to his mind little better than a return to the idolatry of the Jews, which their prophets denounced, and for which God punished them. At least, he regarded the Ritualistic movement as a childish attempt to play with edged weapons. 'Our forefathers fought and died to rescue us from the very evils these people would bring upon the land once again,' he was wont to say. And when he saw worshippers pouring into one of the highest of high churches, as he often did when his way lay through a particular street in London, he was wont to smile and think of the old Scotch woman who, in Lincluden Abbey, flung a stool at a clergyman who affected Romish doctrines.

Often he thought, in his quiet way, of the roofless church, the quiet graveyard, the priest and the hearers, all in their graves; the calm river winding under the grassy hill, on which stood the ruins of the abbey; and considered it might almost provoke speech from the dead to see how the present generation toy with questions once held to be of life and

death, and to concern not merely the welfare of England, but the whole happiness of eternity.

They were now within the church. For the first moment he could see nothing distinctly, the change was so great from the clear frosty light of day to the gloom that obtained inside the beautiful building.

Stained-glass windows darkened the face even of noon; the nave was so long that, though many candles burnt upon the altar, they seemed but as little twinkling points of brightness in the far distance. Gas was not permitted inside the building; lamps burned with a softened and mysterious light, giving to the interior an effect which at first sight was wonderfully impressive. The silent worshippers, almost all kneeling; the light arches and slender pillars and delicate tracery of the stonework, all suggested to the eye rather than garishly revealed; the figures of the acolytes flitting about the chancel; the mingled smell of incense and the fragrance of flowers; the vessels of gold and silver gleaming on the altar; the glittering crucifix; the rich embroidery, hung wherever draperies could be

employed,—affected Sir John curiously, touched him as a great pageant sways the hearts of the masses.

With gliding noiseless footsteps the verger preceded them up the aisle. He knew Lady Moffat by sight, and although theoretically all assembled inside those walls were considered equal, practically those who were best off in the outer world found themselves most carefully considered in the church; for which reason this attendant spirit took the new-comers up to one of the higher places, where, gravely motioning the lady to the right and the gentleman to the left, he retraced his quiet way to the door.

If he had not been well instructed beforehand concerning this matter of etiquette, Sir John might have felt puzzled; but recollecting the arrangement Miss Banks mentioned, he took his place on the male side of the aisle, whilst Lady Moffat for a moment seemed to become merged amongst a mass of silks and laces and flowers and feathers on the other.

He bowed his head and prayed earnestly; she knelt and thought how much nicer a good roomy family pew would be than those nasty narrow little benches, where she was squeezed between two dow-

agers, and knew her velvet dress was being crushed and ruined. She had put it on new that morning, and was aware it would never look so well again.

A soft strain of music, a sound of distant harmony coming nearer and nearer. The congregation arose with one accord, making a noise in simultaneously doing so like a ship cutting her way in the water or a great bird passing swiftly through the air.

Sir John stood up with the rest. He did not in the least comprehend what was coming, but he considered it right and civil to conform to the manners and customs of those around him.

The tones of the organ (unseen) waxed louder, the notes of the chant became clearer. Sir John felt as if he were dreaming; the dim light, the illuminated altar, the deft young acolytes, touching one candle and then another, till all set about the chancel leaped suddenly into flame; a door he had not before perceived opening by no visible agency, and revealing, as in a side scene, a procession of choristers, slowly advancing and singing as they came on.

It seemed to the unaccustomed eyes of the man

who gazed that the procession was endless; on and on and on—first very small boys, then those of a larger growth, then youths taller still, then young men, then great portly fellows, then ascetic-looking priests. The choir-boys and men, children and adults, were all clad in white. A flock of doves could not have looked purer as they passed in their snowy garments up the chancel, each bowing to the altar, each subsiding into his place and drooping his head amongst billows of drapery.

The priests were arrayed differently; according to their degree, they wore garments varying from the plainest to the richest. Wonderful were the adornments of one who knelt before the altar, with his back to the congregation. Marvellous did it seem to a person accustomed to a simpler ritual to see men decked out with lace, to watch the loose and awkward stride of those who crossed the chancel, cumbered with unwonted skirts. But not one-half so strange did the splendour of the robes appear to Sir John as the genuflexions, which seemed to his different faith as meaningless as the prostration of a Hindoo to Vishnu.

The service began. He did not perceive much of the after-play—crossing, bowing, bending; these things passed him by, because, with eyes lowered, with face covered, he prayed where another might have looked on. He had not come to criticise; he had not come to hear the music or to look upon a show. The way of worshipping the Almighty within those walls truly was not his way, but if some storm-tossed souls were able to find safe anchorage in those unlikely waters, what was he that he should smile because others were different from himself?

There had been a time when the old Covenanter blood which flowed in his veins would have risen in hot rebellion at such Popish practices, when many a text would have recurred to memory denouncing idolatry and all idolatrous practices. But he had so long been driving before the winds and the waves, that he felt powerless to criticise, impotent to condemn. He could not thank God he was not as others; the one passionate cry that he uttered to Heaven was, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.'

Sometimes he caught himself wondering how it was with many a one there. Under the purple and

fine linen were there weary hearts throbbing? Not known of men, were there tired souls repentant of sin, remorseful for error; unseen save by God what cancers were consuming their vitality! Never to be told here, what sorrows and tragedies, what griefs and struggles, what troubles and disappointments, lay hidden away under silk and velvet, and the external signs of wealth and the worldly semblance of complete prosperity!

Why, even under the embroidered robes and the priestly functions a worm might be gnawing; sorrow tearing the quivering flesh. As he sat, he thought of Eli ministering before the Lord, his mind disturbed, his heart broken by the iniquity of his sons; and he marvelled whether amongst those within the chancel there might not be one whose soul was even then crying to God in his agony. Unconsciously, perhaps, but still surely, his own sin, his own misery, his own repentance had drawn him nearer and nearer, closer and closer to the Maker he had offended; and as he attained to that knowledge which is perfected alone through suffering, he grew better to understand his fellow-men, and to comprehend more thoroughly

their need, their silence, their suffering, their aspirations, their petitions, and the comfort and the strength the Almighty gives as surely and as wonderfully as daily bread.

Though Sir John was in many respects a weak, he was not an impressionable, man. Music did not touch him much, he had never stood before a painting rapt and forgetful; it was only through suffering, as has been before said, he learned to love Nature. As a great crime makes for the moment an otherwise commonplace individual notorious, so a grievous sin removed Sir John Moffat from the atmosphere of ordinary conventionality in which otherwise he must have moved and had his being.

Error had made him charitable and pitiful to error, sorrow had quickened his perception of human sorrow, remorse had taught him to understand the devious ways, the thousand circuitous routes of the worm that eats all the happiness out of life; trouble had made him thoughtful; guilt, religious—religious in a wide comprehensive sense.

Can man know good till he has eaten of evil? can he understand the bitterness of the fruit till he

has tasted its sweetness? Ah, friends, I think not, and I believe no man may estimate the truth of the Bible till out of the fulness of his own experience he can declare,

'I know that from thorns a man may not gather grapes, nor from thistles, figs.'

Sir John could have told this much, at any rate. He knew just what sin could do for any man, just the grain tares were certain to produce. He had done well, as the world counts success; all men thought him fortunate; he was envied, respected. Ah, look at that worn face, at that head all sprinkled with gray, at those nervously clasped hands, at that humble abandonment of attitude which God knew was only an outward and visible sign of the contrite and broken heart within, and say, was the fruit he gathered goodly or the reverse? the grain into which he thrust his sickle one any man should desire to harvest?

The Litany was omitted, or rather it never at St. Theresa's formed a portion of the forenoon service; this stranger missed it. He had learned to love that fervent outpouring of the heart, though at first it

had seemed to him strange and methodical. It is the one portion of the Church formula which grows upon the hearts of Dissenters and which recommends itself to their minds and feelings, no matter how much the balder faith they may have walked in from childhood rebels against the other forms and ceremonies of the religion as by law established.

Singing—it seemed to Sir John the service was nothing but singing—all music, gesture, mumble; he could scarce hear the words of the lessons, epistle, gospel; the prayers, save that he knew what they were by heart, must have been to him as Greek.

More singing; this time a sad plaintive hymn, with an intelligible air; and while it was in progress a figure he knew walked slowly down the chancel, and, ascending the pulpit-steps, knelt.

No nonsense about that man's movements, no awkward stride, no ill-learnt lesson, no seeming consciousness of the eyes fastened upon him. No millinery about his person; nothing save the plain white surplice and scarlet hood: his own dark hair, his own pale face supplied all the rest.

He knelt—Sir John's gaze followed him—he

rose and stood still while the choristers finished, then he said, as was the custom at that church, 'In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost;' but he did not cross himself. He stood quite erect, he looked down the long aisles, and he said,

'And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man. In the twelfth chapter of second Samuel, and the seventh verse, it is so written, THOU ART THE MAN.'

Could he have chosen no other text? was not Holy Writ long enough and wide enough for him to have selected any verse save that?

For one swift instant Sir John's eyes never left the preacher; then they turned involuntarily across the aisle. Lady Moffat was settling herself into her place, smoothing out the folds of her velvet dress, the peach-like softness he so well remembered on her still fair face, the special beauty of her profile brought out by the subdued light of a window near to where she sat.

'THOU ART THE MAN,' repeated the preacher; and as David slung a stone into the brazen forehead

of his Philistine foe, so he dropped that statement deep down into the heart of one of his hearers.

'The practice of reading the Scriptures piecemeal, so prevalent amongst those who read the Scriptures at all,' began Mr. Woodham, 'has this great disadvantage, that a general knowledge of the characters mentioned and a clear comprehension of the incidents recorded are thereby rendered impossible.

'Suppose that any one tried to read a novel as many persons think they can peruse the Bible—a chapter here, a verse there, with long intervals of time moreover between these desultory studies—is it likely that he could ever arrive at a true idea of the story, or of the nature of the men and women whose actions are told in its pages?

'A paragraph on one page, a few sentences in another, a striking scene perhaps at the end of a volume, or a dramatic position which happens to strike the fancy,—how could any just idea of an author's meaning and intention be derived from such a course of procedure?

'And yet this is how many even very religious people treat the Bible—indeed, so far as my own ex-

perience and observation goes, I might say it is how most people treat it—and the consequence is they utterly fail to grasp its meaning, whether as a complete history of a given period of time, or as a series of narratives of the men who lived during that period, and left their mark for good or for evil upon that history.

'It is not likely that a single person now present is unacquainted with the incidents in the chapter from which my text is taken; the poor man's ewe-lamb, the rich man's haughty greed, the king's swift sympathy with the wronged, the crushing rejoinder of Nathan, the terrible statement, "The sword shall never depart from thine house"—the fiat, "The child also that is born unto thee shall surely die;" the sickness of the child; David's anguish, his tears, his fastings, his prayers, his final resignation; these things, I say, are all familiar in your ears as a tale oft told; but that which is not familiar is a comprehension of the man to whom Nathan came, he who was raised upon high, the anointed of the Lord, the sweet psalmist of Israel. It is, first, this insight into that strange and complex nature I wish to give

you; and second, I desire to speak of the sin for which so terrible a punishment was decreed. It were idle to say such matters are not to be mentioned in the pulpit when we know they are talked of in every home, not with bated breath and the horror they merit and the human pity they should evoke, but as dishes of scandal eagerly served and greedily swallowed; tid-bits of gossip to be carried from house to house, to be canvassed and gloated over, as though the sin and the sorrow, the suffering, the remorse, the ruin were as grateful to the minds of Christians in the nineteenth century as the struggles of men and wild beasts in the arena were pleasant to the nobles and matrons of imperial Rome.'

There was a rustle in the building, a swish amongst the women, as when a breeze disturbs the fallen leaves; a stir through the men, as though they were rousing themselves to a keener attention.

Not a man or woman present but knew perfectly well the idea which suggested this theme to the preacher. A great scandal had arisen—one of those terrible stories of domestic shipwreck that periodically delight modern society, and increase the sale

of newspapers, seem very shocking to honest-minded folks, and very piquant and amusing to cads of high and low degree.

The principals in the drama were people well known to many in the congregation, and those who did not happen to be personally acquainted with them were intimate with friends of the respective families. Mr. Woodham, it was well understood, strongly disapproved of the morbid interest taken in the affair. He had not hesitated to express censure in quarters where such censure was unusual and likely to give offence; in no faltering terms was his voice raised in reprobation of the sparrow-like chattering there had been over this delicious grain of scandal. He had denounced the gloating over each fresh detail of shame and sorrow in language society is not much accustomed to hear nowadays, which, so said his suave vicar, might have befitted the times of Wesley or Luther, but could scarcely, with advantage, be reproduced in the midst of a highly educated and refined age. It was stated he had taken his hat, and straightway walked out of a drawing-room, when a fashionable lady persisted in asking his opinions

concerning the 'sad affair;' and he had not scrupled to style the court over which Sir James Hannen presides a disgrace to the community, and to add it was only because of the hardness of men's hearts divorce could be considered permissible at all.

It was therefore conceived by most of his hearers that he now meant to vindicate the position he had taken up, and make David's transgression a mere peg upon which to hang matters more personal to himself; but such was far from his intention. The late scandal had indeed suggested to him the idea of speaking some very plain truths to a congregation over-fond of having their ears tickled and their foibles humoured. But when he came to devote his whole mind to the narrative, he had found the touching brevity of that dark wrong committed so long ago—yet brought so near by the human interest, which never grows old, threading every line of the terrible tragedy—so impress his imagination, so overmaster his own narrower experiences, that he had almost lost himself in following the footsteps of the poet-king, as he wandered from probity to error, from the

heights of magnanimous self-renunciation to the lowest depths of cowardly treachery.

As in the sermon to which Miss Banks had referred he traced the career of Elijah in words that stirred the hearts of his hearers, and for a moment hurried the movements of their pulses, languid from long prosperity, cold from the thraldom of fashion,—so now he carried along the stream of his eloquence an attention not easy to arouse; an interest difficult, as he well knew, to awaken.

But he was not thinking then either of his audience or himself. His thoughts were in Palestine, with the young lad watching those few sheep in the wilderness. He forgot the modern Babylon wherein his own lot was cast; the men and women living in it, who, like the Athenians, are from very weariness and empty-mindedness for ever crying aloud to be told something new. Though his outward eyes rested on rank and beauty, on everything which could please the sight and delight the superficial mind, his imagination showed him scenes of deeper interest, of wide experiences, of wild excitement; and in burning words he tracked the course of

David's life from the time when he was anointed by Samuel, as he hoped some day in his own person to eagerly track the paths he followed when fleeing for his life, when speeding to victory.

A wonderful story, truly; stranger than any fiction, wilder in its romance than the heart of man could have conceived; so full of adventure, of danger, of honour, of reward, of anxiety, of peril, that the listeners held their breath as the preacher passed rapidly from point to point of that marvellous biography.

He touched on the inconsistencies of the man's character; the at first sight almost irreconcilable qualities a novelist would have tried to explain and analyse, but which the Scripture narrative passes over without a word of comment. The audacity and modesty, the strength and weakness, the courage and the cowardice, the force and the feebleness, the boundless generosity and the incredible vindictiveness; all these opposite traits Mr. Woodham brought before his hearers, showing the contradictions in the psalmist's nature, and proving that, throughout the whole of his troubled career, he

never met with so dangerous, mighty, and insidious a foe as himself.

It was a fine discourse. Even those present who were accustomed to run after good preachers, and follow clerical orators from abbey to chapel and cathedral to church, subsequently confessed they were, for the time, carried 'off their feet' by the words of this man's address.

Here were no tricks of elocution; no practised action with which to impress his utterances on his hearers. His manner was simplicity itself; his gestures few and far between; and his language, to those accustomed to a more redundant style, might have seemed almost bald. But the latter was not severe from any lack of words in which to clothe his ideas—rather it impressed an attentive listener with the feeling of abundant vitality.

In following him the hearer felt he was not putting out all his strength; that behind the measured sentences, the calm composure, the wonderful fluency, which neither hurried nor hesitated, there was a strong reserve of force. And that force was displayed when he came to speak of the murder of

Uriah, of the sin for which divine justice mingled bitter with the cup of David's whole future life.

Had such an ending been foretold when, tending 'those few sheep' in the wilderness, he looked eagerly onward over the years to come; when he trod the hills of Palestine young and humble, strong, valiant, faithful, he might well, like Hazael, have asked, 'Is thy servant a dog that he should do this?'

And yet, like Hazael, he did do it.

When Saul sought to destroy him, he spared his adversary's life. When he lay sleeping undreaming of danger, the brave soldier, the sweet singer of Israel, cut off the skirt of the king's robe, and took the cruse of water and the spear from beside his bolster, but let the sleeper dream on unharmed; and now the same man set himself coolly to compass the death of his friend, one of the thirty-and-three who fetched him, at the peril of their own safety, that draught of longed-for water from the well of Bethlehem, which, when they brought it, he refused to drink, saying,

'Far be it, O Lord, that I should do this. Is

not this the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives?'

The great argument which has always been used in defence of the poet-king's treachery, Mr. Woodham would not admit as much, if any, excuse for David's baseness.

The Almighty, speaking through His servant Nathan, takes no notice of the penalty incurred by either man or woman, while the king himself, by his silence, evidently feels such penalty to be quite beside the question.

He had sinned; and in the train of that sin followed all the vices which constitute the dark retinue of guilt, amongst them deceit, cowardice, treachery.

What a picture was that the preacher drew of David's heart while he wrote his letter to Joab; of his blunted conscience; his craven fears; his abject terror; his forgetfulness of the God who had raised him to be ruler over Israel; his ingratitude to the servant who had been true to him in his time of need!

All this wickedness planned deliberately also! It might be in the extremest exigency; but still

with plenty of time to plot, to contrive, to deliberate, to draw back.

And then the hypocrisy with which he bade the messenger who, fulfilling Joab's command (Joab who afterwards thrust Absolom through the heart while he was yet alive), told the king, 'Uriah the Hittite is dead,' say to him who sent the tidings,

'Let not this thing displease thee, for the sword devoureth one as well as another.'

Ah, had Uriah but died by the sword fairly and honestly, happy might David have been in the after time which he lived through, distracted by bitter feuds and hatred amongst his own children, by the rebellion of Absolom, by the intrigues of Adonijah, so that his last days were disturbed by the machinations of those who would have have ousted Solomon from the succession.

A mere outline this of the sermon; the slightest skeleton of a discourse which the preacher's genius and earnestness made flesh and blood—a living breathing humanity. Only a story of the sin of a sinner; but such a sinner! A story well-nigh three thousand years old; yet one which fell on the ears

of those who heard, fresh as though the transgression had been of yesterday, the punishment still to be wrought out.

'There are persons,' so Mr. Woodham said, at the end of his sermon, 'at the present day, as no doubt there have been persons in all days, who think lightly of the sin which called down on David's head the wrath of God. I cannot imagine why this should be. It baffles me to imagine how it has come to pass that reasonable human beings should think or speak lightly of such guilt. We have seen what his sin wrought for the psalmist: not merely the death of the child, which is the point where most people seem to think his chastisement ended, but the long series of disasters that followed his footsteps from the time of Uriah's death till he himself waxed old and stricken in years, and the days drew nigh that he should die.

'There is an idea abroad—why, it would be difficult to say—that, under the Gospel dispensation, this crime is not so heinous as under the law. Now this is a total mistake. If there be any difference it is, as modern society is constituted, a more cruel wrong

than in the time of Uriah. God forbid I should say the tie of wife and child was less strong in that far-away time, when most men had several wives and many children. Not a line of the Old Testament but forbids this opinion; but yet it seems to me that, in our own case, here amongst us, with a better light shining across our lives, with a purer day gladdening our existence, the guilt of adultery is greater than even under the old law, when it was enacted that death should be the penalty for such an offence, that "evil might be put away from Israel."

'My friends, do not deceive yourselves. If, under a more merciful dispensation, the punishment is lighter, the crime in the sight of God is none the less. Reading the divine law by the light of history, there is but one in its consequences worse to be found, and that David did not commit. If you bear this fact well in mind, you will be better able to understand the man.

'In an age steeped in idolatry, ruler over a people given at the smallest provocation, or indeed at none, to turn and inquire of gods that were not

gods, and honour any save Him who made the heaven and the earth, David stood firm.

'I do not say he was always faithful; men such as he rarely are. It seems incredible to us, looking back over his story, that he should have forgotten so often that God who was his God; nevertheless, this remains: he never turned aside to strange altars; he did not make his sons and daughters pass through the fire to Moloch, he offered no human sacrifices; so far as in his weak humanity lay, he obeyed God, he worshipped God, he loved God.'

Mr. Woodham added but a few words more. He had one great merit sometimes not possessed even by famous preachers. He knew when to stop; he did not weaken the force of the story he had told by recapitulating its details. He had reproduced the man's weakness and his strength, his sin and his repentance; he had given many amongst the congregation something to think of if they ever meant to think at all; and as he uttered his last sentence he cast a strange, lingering, yearning look around, as though he would fain have learnt if any heart was touched, any conscience wrung by that terrible nar-

rative of sin and treachery, of punishment and repentance.

The vast crowd swept out; nothing common or unclean trailed its long skirts down those paved aisles, I warrant you. No Magdalene among that assemblage, covering her tear-stained face with hrouding hair; no Bathsheba the world wot of; no sinner man could distinguish, walking with downcast eyes and pallid face out from the presence of God, back into the weary dreary world.

Certainly no man or woman present would have imagined Lady Moffat had ever wandered from the path of virtue as, handsome and well dressed, she stood on the pavement exchanging greetings with a very few intimate friends, and bows with those who did not feel privileged to adventure a warmer greeting.

She was looking remarkably well, better in health than had been the case for some time previously, handsome, prosperous, the very ideal of worldly happiness. A slight colour tinged her cheeks; her wonderful eyes drew admiring, almost startled, looks from many persons who that day saw Lady Moffat for the first time, and remembered afterwards they

had so seen her. In her sables and her velvets, in her rich attire, in the very zenith of her magnificent beauty, who could have guessed she had ever stood in the morning twilight by the gate of that mean house in the Romford-road, poor, lonely, and, so far as any efficient help went, friendless?

A change here indeed, my readers, if you think of it, one only possible in a great city—a metamorphosis that could never have taken place save in the solitude of a multitude, in the utter privacy and secrecy which can be found and compassed nowhere except in the very middle of a mighty crowd.

Thus my lady, with the winter sunshine streaming full upon her unveiled face, with her trailing robes, with her costly furs, with her air of having been 'a person' which subsequent acquaintance gradually dispelled, with her haughty carriage, with her rare smile, a sight indeed for those who loved the aristocracy—whether of birth or money or both—to feast upon as they passed modestly upon the outside of the pavement, or looked back upon this vision of beauty and prosperity as they crossed the road opposite St. Theresa's.

As for Sir John, the while he came slowly out tangled amongst an awkward squad of men, he did not look so much unlike the fairy godmother who had wrought such a transformation as might rashly be supposed.

No artist ever represented Cinderella's benefactress as a personally attractive individual, dressed in the extreme of the fashion, and diverting to herself that attention which the glass-slippered young woman properly engrossed.

In similar manner the magician who, with a wave of his wand, changed Mira Palthorpe into Lady Moffat; the narrow house—nothing save her husband's love made beautiful—into a great mansion in Palace Gardens; the old red shawl into costliest sables, the poor dress which fell in such graceful folds around her young slight figure into silks and velvets a queen might have worn; the humble surroundings into such luxury as could better be catalogued by an auctioneer than one so ignorant of such articles as a humble novelist; the modest and old-fashioned method of getting along the world's roads to well-appointed carriages and horses, each one of

which cost over three times the salary the young fellow who lost all for love received in those far-away days—the magician, I say, who wrought all these miracles came out of church looking, as was very fit indeed, a grim sort of wizard, hard-featured, stern-faced, gray of aspect, worn of soul.

Looking at him, my readers who are behind the scenes may conclude he found the Galatea himself had created a very doubtful blessing; that during Mr. Woodham's sermon, his thoughts having gone on a long and weary journey, he came out of church exhausted, just as Cinderella's godmother might, if mortal, have felt when the last horse was put to the coach, and the final touch added to her *protégée's* toilette.

'Are you not well, Sir John?' asked Miss Banks, posing on the pavement as one of the ladies-in-waiting.

She was quick enough to see that gray pallor, that something which, like death, had altered the fashion of the man's countenance. She saw the far-away look in his eyes, the trouble in his face, though she could not in the least comprehend what was amiss.

There stood my lady, happy, handsome, healthy. There stood Sir John, grave, gaunt, grievous of aspect, a mate unfit, apparently, for such a spouse.

'Quite well, thank you,' he answered; 'but I found the church a little close.'

'Yes, it was close,' agreed Lady Moffat. 'The smell of that stuff—'

'Incense,' mildly corrected Miss Banks.

'Yes,' went on her ladyship, accepting the information, but not availing herself of it—'made me feel faint for a time.'

'You do not look faint now, at any rate,' remarked Sir John, glancing at his wife's bright animated face coolly and critically, without one feeling of admiration, with nothing save a wild wonder that she had ever in his eyes possessed a single charm. 'The incense was bad enough,' he added, turning to Miss Banks, 'but I really think the ladies' scents and essences were far worse. I could not have believed perfumes might become so disagreeable.'

'But you dislike all perfumes,' said Lady Moffat, in a tone which implied he had in most respects an imperfect and uncultivated taste.

'Well, yes,' he answered thoughtfully, 'perhaps I do.'

'Even the scent of flowers?' asked Miss Banks.

'I am afraid I must plead guilty,' he said, looking at the lady, who he found was gazing curiously at him.

'Many people cannot sit in the room even with a rose,' she observed carelessly. 'And what did you think of Mr. Woodham, Sir John?'

'He is a fine preacher, a very fine preacher,' replied Sir John.

'I do not care for him,' said Lady Moffat. 'I do not like him at all. He is so dreadfully long-winded.'

Sir John made no comment on this criticism, and neither did Miss Banks. Had she and Lady Moffat been alone she would have cried out, 'How delightfully original you are! you never hesitate about expressing your opinions;' but she did not care to adventure upon this sort of thing in Sir John's presence. The three were now walking quietly back to Palace Gardens, where Miss Banks was invited to partake of luncheon. She often lunched at Holyrood

House, and never without stating in her nice, candid, humble way,

'I call this dinner. I never think of having any other meal after I have had luncheon with you.'

This remark came so regularly that Mr. Simonds always instantly handed her a further supply of provisions, and immediately replenished her wine-glass. He paid the lady these and other delicate attentions for 'the sport,' and not because of any love he bore Miss Banks, of whom he spoke disparagingly in the free discussion hall below-stairs, referring to her with a fine sneer as the 'head dish' at Sir John's table.

There was nothing more noticeable about Lady Moffat than the way she stopped all conversation. Coleridge himself could scarcely have talked in her presence. Unless she was discussing some matter of dress or fashion or pleasure, she figuratively banged the door in the face of every topic upon which persons were rash enough to engage. Nothing which did not in some way or other relate to herself had the smallest attraction for her.

'She is more ignorant than her own cook,' thought

Miss Banks, 'and ruder than a street arab;' but she kept these daring opinions to herself, and proceeded to make such remarks as she felt were suitable to Lady Moffat's understanding; gossip about mutual acquaintances, criticisms on bonnets and mantles, sly little hits at Mrs. This and Miss The-other, the latest news about Lady Griffin, with whom she was going to dine that evening, and speculations as to the manner of man the curate who was to replace Mr. Woodham would prove.

All the time this mild trickle of talk was proceeding from Miss Banks' insincere old lips, Sir John stalked along in silence, wrapped in a reverie which seemed as dark as it was deep, and which absorbed him until the trio reached Holyrood House.

Arrived there he went straight to the library, and when Simonds announced luncheon was ready, excused himself from partaking of that meal.

'I feel quite sure Sir John is not well,' said Miss Banks, when this message was delivered. 'I noticed how pale he looked when he came out of church. If you remember, I asked him if he were ill.'

'I do not think there is anything the matter

with him,' returned Lady Moffat; 'don't rise from table, Rachel. I won't have it. I am sure your papa would be very angry if you were to disturb him; you are so fond of putting yourself forward. No,' she continued, returning to her original text after this agreeable remark, 'he often refuses to take luncheon on Sundays, and very frequently will not have dinner on week-days. Gentlemen are odd, you know.'

'Ah,' commented Mr. Simonds to himself, 'they are not half as odd as ladies.'

He heard a good deal of this sort of thing, and though he did not approve of his master he approved less of his mistress.

Meanwhile Sir John was reading the story of that life, the like of which no dramatist ever imagined, no romance ever approached. He began it at the beginning, when the youth, ruddy and of a beautiful countenance, comes last of all Jesse's sons into the presence of Samuel.

From this point he followed the narrative on: followed David from the lonely hill-side, which he must so often have thought of in his after life, from the

care of those few sheep he exchanged for the care of a whole people. He saw how those early experiences were never forgotten, how they influenced the imagery of the psalms, how the cool water and the green grass and suchlike peaceful recollections and associations recurred to memory in the midst of danger and turmoil and the thousand sorrows that encompassed his throne; he saw him go down and slay the Philistine, he heard the sweet tones of that harp he played so cunningly, he beheld him in jeopardy of his life from the mad jealousy of Saul, he read of the love passing the love of woman he felt for Jonathan, he tracked his footsteps as he fled from the king's insane vengeance—shared his perils, his fears, his privations.

A wonderful story, one which for incident never was surpassed; for hairbreadth escapes, for wild adventure, for marvellous excitement, for strange vicissitude, never has been, and never will be, equalled.

Yes, Mr. Woodham said right; such a tale to be properly understood must be taken in its entirety. From the wilderness to the palace, from the camp to

the court, from the solitary midnight vigils to the pomp and circumstance of a king! What a varied life, what strange experiences, what extraordinary chances and changes! Certainly Sir John felt he had never before fully grasped the whole marvellous history, never previously comprehended the nature of the man.

He read on—still on. The glory of the day was over, and the afternoon shadows began to creep down Palace Gardens; but Sir John did not notice the passage of time.

His spirit was away from London; he paced the slopes of Palestine; he entered Jerusalem; he followed the progress of the soldier-king; he saw him for once taking rest and refraining from going down into the battle; and, though it was all so old a tale, though thousands of years had come and gone since the actors in that wonderful drama trod the soil of Judea, it seemed fresh to him as though the incidents were being enacted then. He felt the temptation sweeping by; it seemed to rush through his own soul, as it went straight to the heart of the king. That time of soft idleness; that hour of dangerous

leisure; the fair woman; the impulsive reckless man; the sin which could never be undone; the crime which begot something so far more monstrous, that God Himself smote the offender, destroying the fruit of his body for the sin of the soul.

He looked where David lay weeping and fasting, mourning for the child who was to die, burdened by the reproaches of his own conscience, bowed down by the weight of his guilt.

And so to the end, through all the complications that vexed and harassed the king's declining days; mournfully in the gathering twilight the bitter cry, 'My son, my son!' seemed to echo about the quiet room. Torn, distracted, perplexed, his strength gone, his heart broken, the kingdoms of this world waxing small, the pageant of life growing indistinct and dim! Sir John could not see the page, for his own eyes were full of tears. The letters grew blurred and indistinct before him; he forgot where he was; forgot the book lying open he had been reading, and, covering his face with his hands, wept drops of bitterness in silence.

He did not hear the door softly open, or know

that a sweet face had peeped round the screen, and then, with a sorrowful look upon it, as quietly withdrawn. He was gone back—back into his own past. He saw before him the blue eyes of the man he had wronged; he beheld again that storm he was for ever picturing in his own fancy, and across the waste of waters could almost hear the last despairing cry for help. It grew darker still; it was now almost quite dark. Once again the door opened, this time not so silently. Round the screen, across the thick carpet, swept my lady.

'John,' she said, laying her hand upon his shoulder, and bringing him with that one word out from the irrevocable past to the miserable present.

'What is it?' he asked, without uncovering his face or changing his attitude.

'Why do you go reading such things?' she asked, seeing the Bible open on the table, and jumping instantly to a knowledge of how Sir John had spent the afternoon. 'What is the use of it? I cannot think what possessed that man to preach such a sermon. I know it was nothing else upset you.'

He did not answer a word. He made no sign when she closed the volume and put it away.

'Come,' she said, moving over again to his side. 'Don't sit there any longer. Fretting won't do any good; besides, what is there to fret about? Come, Miss Banks will be going almost directly.'

Her speech was not sympathetic, but Sir John heard with some surprise a ring in her voice both of distress and anxiety.

'I will join you presently,' he replied.

'Do,' she entreated; 'and make haste. Miss Banks must leave immediately, and she will think it so strange if she does not see you.'

Sir John lifted his head, and answered,

'What can it matter whether she thinks it strange or not? Any one might imagine you were afraid of her.'

'I!' cried Lady Moffat. 'I am not afraid of anybody in the world!' and she flounced out of the room, the noiseless sweep of her velvet dress in singular contrast to the hurry and irritation of her movements.

CHAPTER III.

MR. WOODHAM IS ASTONISHED.

It was the next evening. Dinner at Holyrood House had been over for some little time, and before a blazing fire, with shaded lights softening down the eccentricities of the Egyptian decorations, Sir John Moffat and one guest sat talking confidentially over their wine.

At the banquet recently finished the usual skeleton had been absent, for my lady kept her room. Well as she seemed on the previous day, she was now laid up with one of those attacks which baffled the skill of her doctor and defied the penetration of those great physicians Sir John had insisted upon her consulting. One hour no woman need have desired to look better or to feel better than did Lady Moffat; the next she was prostrate with what, for want of a better name, her doctor called 'nervous irritability.' She would eat nothing, drink nothing, say nothing;

but remain solitary till the malady wore itself out, or the fit of despondency passed over.

Only one clue the doctor ever was able to gain. Invariably the illness seemed to be preceded by bad dreams.

'If I only could keep from dreaming!' said my lady irritably. 'I never used to dream.'

Judging from Sir John's appearance, any one would have thought he had spent his night also in wandering through some dark and terrible land peopled by ghostly phantoms of memory or fancy.

Many people in the City had asked him during the course of that day if he were ill, and Mr. Woodham, who was the only guest, could not avoid noticing at dinner the anxious glances Rachel directed across the table and the deep abysses of abstraction into which Sir John occasionally fell, and from which he roused himself with a perceptible effort.

The two girls had dined with them, but flitted away almost the moment the last course was over. Mr. Woodham also, shortly after Simonds finally retired from the room, said he thought he had better go, as Lady Moffat was so unwell, and would have

carried his suggestion into effect had not his host pressed him to remain with an earnestness there was no mistaking.

Nevertheless Sir John soon relapsed into silence, and the bulk of the conversation fell upon Mr. Woodham, who began to talk of himself and his somewhat dreary prospects—his reasons for leaving St. Theresa's, and his determination not again to accept a curacy surrounded by similar restrictions and hampered by the same forms.

He had been behind the scenes of Ritualism, and he waxed eloquent in denouncing what he considered its narrowing influences to his host, whom he had no reason to doubt belonged to the straitest of Puritan sects; and his astonishment was therefore great when Sir John asked him if he did not think there might, after all, be some virtue in confession.

'You know we have never discussed these matters before,' went on the master of Holyrood House, 'because I always believed our opinions upon them were far as the Poles asunder.'

'Well, I must confess I was once more of a Ritualist than I am now,' said Mr. Woodham, smil-

ing, and yet looking somewhat confused. 'I never was one thoroughly, but I felt open to conviction. Now I may say I do not think any man could convince me that the childish details, say of such a ceremonial as you saw yesterday, can really benefit the cause of true religion.

'Conscientiously I could not take any prominent part in such a service,' went on Mr. Woodham; 'and so there is nothing for it save to look out for another curacy. My decision has grieved my mother, and will possibly injure my worldly prospects; but I felt it was impossible for me to continue at St. Theresa's and seem even tacitly to acquiesce in all the changes the vicar has lately inaugurated;' and as he concluded he looked at Sir John with a certain appeal in his expression which was completely unnoticed by that gentleman.

Instead of answering, Sir John poured himself out another glass of port and said nothing.

Mr. Woodham toyed nervously with some filberts he had taken, but which he did not seem inclined to eat. Watching his host narrowly, he saw him sink once again down, down into that strange reverie

which seemed to engulf his mind as a morass might his body.

'What *can* he be thinking of?' thought Mr. Woodham. 'Has he lost his money, or is he going to lose it?' and involuntarily he glanced round the room another City man had decorated, wherein that other man had sat on the night when he knew his ship was gone down, and that his only chance of even personal safety was instant flight.

The idea, fleeting though it was, gave him courage to speak once more of his own more modest fortunes. He talked a little about his cousin, who might have done something for him, but who had refused to do so; of the excuses he felt should be made for a man who had lost the one possession he desired, and gained wealth and rank too late. He said he had formerly thought of joining one of the foreign missions, but that now he should like to remain in England, because his mother was not strong, and—and for other reasons, he added. He was very careful to add he never expected to succeed to the family title.

'It is said about here, I know, freely,' he went

on, 'that one day I shall be Lord Chesunt; but there is not the slightest likelihood of such a thing coming to pass. Neither should I wish to stand in my cousin's shoes. I have no desire to be great or very rich. I—'

'That was a wonderful sermon of yours yesterday,' interrupted Sir John, not in the smallest degree as a comment on Mr. Woodham's statements, but as a natural result of his own train of thought.

The clergyman looked gratified, and murmured modestly,

'It is very kind of you to think so.'

'Yes, a wonderful sermon,' repeated his host. 'You know, I have never heard you preach before.'

It is so very difficult to acknowledge praise of this sort that Mr. Woodham remained discreetly silent.

'You have a great gift,' continued Sir John. 'I do not know that I ever listened to a discourse which made so deep an impression upon me.'

'I am very glad to hear you say that,' answered Mr. Woodham; 'for I wanted to touch some amongst the regular congregation, and you encour-

age me to hope I may have produced an impression even on them.'

Sir John did not reply. He was looking across the table into the dim distance of the room, where certainly there was nothing for him to see, and the strange look which had previously puzzled his guest crept slowly like a shadow across his face; then, without the smallest relevancy, as it seemed, he plunged into a dissertation on the character of David. He went round and round the subject; he fenced with it, toyed with it, tore himself away, and then instantly returned to the subject, till Mr. Woodham, listening to him first amazedly and then perplexedly, could not but feel some subtle attraction he was unable to discover lay within the Bible story, that there existed an intimate connection, some near association, between the psalmist's sin and Sir John's interest in the narrative.

The two faces were a study at that moment: Mr. Woodham's severely handsome, high-bred, ascetic, with an expression upon it of the most painful and engrossing doubt and attention; Sir John's worn, hard-featured, drawn almost with the

intensity of the feelings which were working in his heart.

'Suppose now,' he went on, 'there were any one amongst your congregation yesterday troubled in mind, doubtful as to his own past, seeing nothing save sorrow in store for him in the future, should you not consider it would be good if he were to tell his grief—say in confession?' and Sir John for a moment turned his eyes towards his guest, and then as quickly averted them.

Mr. Woodham pushed his filberts aside, and laid his arm upon the table.

'No, I should not,' he answered. 'I have seen how confession of that sort works, and I believe it to be a delusion and a snare. If there were such a man amongst my hearers yesterday, I can but hope he will take his trouble to God, and receive pardon from his Maker.'

'You know,' went on Sir John, 'I was reared a Presbyterian, and I am a Presbyterian in most of my doctrines and ideas; yet still it seems to me—of course I am now speaking generally—that there might be sins it would be a relief to confess to man,

that the reserve of even the most reticent human being might some day overleap its barrier, and feel it a necessity to give expression to feelings pent up possibly for years.'

Still with that puzzled anxious look upon his countenance, Mr. Woodham shook his head.

'If in a moment of weakness a man were to do what you suggest, he would repent it bitterly afterwards,' he said. 'I do not know how it may be in the Romish Church,' he went on; 'but in ours most certainly I can but say to act upon such an impulse would be a fatal error. The Ritualists themselves feel that,' he added, trying to speak lightly; 'for they rarely tell anything in confession which might not be proclaimed from the house-tops.'

What a look it was Sir John threw upon his companion—one of appeal, reproof, entreaty, misery, and hope!

'And yet your own Prayer-book,' he said, in those Northern accents that cropped out whenever he was strongly moved, 'contains the special clause that a sick person shall be moved to make a special confession of his sins if he feel his conscience trou-

bled with any weighty matter. How do you get over that, Mr. Woodham?'

Mr. Woodham did not try to get over it. He only placed his hand firmly on the table, and asked,

'To what is all this tending, Sir John?'

'Just to this,' said Sir John, still with that uneasy glance of his eyes, that shifting expression on his face. 'I want to tell you the story of a friend of mine; he wants it told. He desires advice; and I think, after hearing your sermon, you are just the man to give it.'

'For God's sake, don't tell the story to me!' interrupted Mr. Woodham. 'Whoever the man may be, whatever his sin and his sorrow, don't let him take me into his confidence *now*. It—it—might put a bar between me—and—him. O, pray, Sir John, keep silence! If the tale be an old one, let it still lie buried.'

There was silence—an awful silence. Then Sir John Moffat, looking straight in Mr. Woodham's eyes, knew why he wanted to hear no more; and Mr. Woodham, gazing like one fascinated into that worn haggard face, understood something of the sin

and the sorrow which had taken all the sap out of life, and left existence the dry wood he always vaguely understood that man felt it to be.

An hour later Mr. Woodham was standing under the starlight in front of Holyrood House. That silence, which both himself and Sir John felt to be more oppressive than the wildest uproar, had been broken by the entrance of Simonds with coffee. Never was interruption more welcome; never did man feel more relieved than Mr. Woodham when he heard Sir John ask his butler if the young ladies were in the drawing-room. The words spoken, if not quite in his usual tone, at least in a manner sufficiently easy and natural, seemed to clear the atmosphere like a gust of crisp frosty air sweeping through the closeness of a sick-chamber.

'No, Sir John,' answered Simonds; 'they went up-stairs immediately after dinner.'

Mr. Woodham took comfort out of this. He did not want to remain longer than he could possibly avoid. He desired to be out in the night alone for a time, till he recovered somewhat from the effect of the shock he had received.

He finished his coffee, and then, murmuring some remark about fearing to intrude if he stayed longer while Lady Moffat was unwell, took his leave. This time Sir John did not strive to detain him. There was a hopeless weary look in his face that struck to Mr. Woodham's heart; a listless feebleness in the way he shook his guest's hand at the hall-door, whither he accompanied him, the clergyman could not drive from his memory.

When he left the gates he did not turn towards Kensington High-street; instead, he set his face northward; and at the top of Palace Gardens, taking the Notting Hill-road, made a detour round by the Uxbridge-road and the grounds of Holland House, till at length he found himself in the main thoroughfare to Hammersmith, and not far from Edwardes-square. But he did not, even when close by, take the turning which led to his mother's house. He kept straight on—up the Kensington-road and Kensington High-street, till he came again to Palace Gardens, and the place now so full of mystery to his mind.

Strange as Sir John's manner and Sir John's

words had seemed when he sat opposite to him, they appeared far stranger when he considered both, hurrying along with no other companionship than his own thoughts. What was the mystery in Palace Gardens? Like most other persons, he had felt there must, to quote Mr. Lassils' frank expression, 'be a screw loose' somewhere in the Moffat household; but hitherto it never occurred to him there was aught worse amiss than my lady's awful temper —enough, in all conscience—and perhaps a streak of insanity on the side of Sir John's handsome wife, which might account charitably for her stormy moods and otherwise inexplicable eccentricities.

Now, however, it was impossible for him to doubt that, let what would be wrong, Sir John was 'in it,' not as a victim, but as an accomplice. There was no mistaking that fact. Mr. Woodham had not lived his life in vain; he had not walked through the world with his eyes shut. If his West-end experiences had shown him little more than the vanity and selfishness, and egotism and meanness, and want of charity of those born Fortune's favourites, his

knowledge of the East gave an insight into human nature he might have sought for in vain amongst the squares and terraces of fashionable London. He had worked amongst the poorest of the poor and the lowest of the low. He had seen sorrow and he had beheld sin; he had spoken comforting words to women well-nigh heart-broken, and listened to the despairing utterances of remorse. He knew, from the moment Sir John began his comments upon the character of David, there must be some attraction for him in the story his fellows did not wot of; and when he put forward his supposititious friend he felt so certain it was of himself he spoke, he stopped the words ere they could pass his host's lips, dreading to hear, afraid with a great fear of learning what Sir John desired to tell.

Why did he desire to tell it? As he walked along, with the silence of suburban London around, and the glittering stars shining above his head, Mr. Woodham asked himself that question till he grew tired and weary of conjecture.

Was it because, to adopt his own expression, he had kept silence for years? The clergyman would

not entertain that idea for a moment, neither could he imagine the reserve almost of a lifetime, reserve which certainly was an integral part of Sir John's character, breaking bounds save under the pressure of some new and terrible necessity.

He did not believe a person could so change his nature as in an instant to feel the need of a confidant, after having managed to exist so long without one.

The more he reflected, the more puzzled he grew. What could have happened to induce such a sudden collapse in the strength of such a nature? Had any pressing occasion for action and decision arisen? Was any crisis imminent, any collapse at hand? If it were so, how could he justify his own refusal to hear the story, whatever it might be? In a general way, he knew he was right to advise reticence, to repress such confidences; but in this particular case he felt doubtful. He might have mistaken the cry of his own heart, the desire of his own soul, the knowledge of the world he had acquired, for prudence and discretion. In his own eagerness to put far from him acquaintance with any terrible secret,

he might have been stifling the anguished appeal of a torn and tortured conscience.

He would go back; he would tell Sir John he had reconsidered his own words; he would say he was willing to share any burden, to assist any laden sinner. And so in hot haste he walked up Palace Gardens, and passed through the gate, and strode along the drive, and looked up at Holyrood House, where lights were still shining, and stood before the door—ay, and held the knocker in his hand, and then—paused and hesitated.

Sir John might ere now have repented of his own utterances; might be regretting even then the lengths to which he had gone; might feel vexed at his pretext having been deemed so transparent. No; Mr. Woodham could not again solicit a confidence he had refused, could not encroach upon a trouble, the evidences of which were so accidentally exposed before him.

'I will write in the morning,' he considered; 'write and say that if any poor help of mine can serve the person referred to, if one who is not wealthy or influential, or aught save true and faith-

ful, appear likely to prove of use, he may command me. I cannot, under any pretence, force myself upon him to-night;' and he turned slowly away, and walked thoughtfully and sadly down Palace Gardens.

He believed his own sermon had some share in Sir John's distress; 'but not much,' he considered, with mournful modesty, 'not much.'

'Whatever the sin may have been, it is not that which is troubling him now; it is the consequences of the sin. When Nathan said to David, "Thou art the man," it was then the king felt fully, and confessed his guilt. What is the calamity which has come to this sinner, reflecting to his own conscience, as from a mirror, the face of his crime?'

With head bent and mind absorbed, he was passing the entrance to Kensington Palace, when a stranger, advancing swiftly from the opposite direction, almost ran against him.

On both sides apologies swift and courteous were made and received. Mr. Woodham continued on his road, and the unknown individual pursued his way.

'I wonder what it all means,' considered the

clergyman, recalling for the hundredth time Sir John's words and Sir John's manner. Wanting a clue, how could he tell? How could he know that an advertisement which that morning appeared in the second column of the *Times* had been to the master of Holyrood House as the voice of Fate, as the coming event for which Mr. Woodham's sermon might have prepared him?

Even then, even while he sat listening, while the incense floated through the church, and scents and perfumes made the air faint and heavy to his unaccustomed senses, the message was on its way.

It came to Palace Gardens, to Holyrood House, to the master and mistress of the mansion so long uninhabited, wrapped up in print—an emissary of misfortune in the shape of an ordinary paper.

'FIFTY POUNDS REWARD,' thus ran the advertisement.—'Information wanted concerning the daughter of Thomas Palthorpe, who was born at Sunnydown Farm, Ravelsmede, Hampshire. If living, she would now be of age. The above reward will be paid for any reliable intelligence as to her whereabouts by

Messrs. Craton & Crawton, Solicitors, Lincoln's-inn-fields.'

As he read, the *Times* dropped from Sir John's nerveless fingers. The footfalls of Retribution seemed sounding in his ear. What did it mean? Who could be searching for Rachel? To whom besides himself did it seem likely the fact of her life or death might prove of the slightest significance?

Lady Moffat could have enlightened him on that point. Lady Moffat understood the horror she had so long dreaded. The possible misfortune—the *only* misfortune she really feared—which had disturbed her when Fate seemed most propitious, which had coloured the dreams of that magnificently prosperous later life, was at hand.

She did not know whether misfortune was really tracking her down, or whether its stroke might still be averted, but she comprehended what the advertisement meant. She was perfectly aware who had dictated it; and as she once paced beside a swiftly flowing river with the shades of night darkling all around, so she now walked backward and forward in

the solitude of her own room, with the unknown future stretching gloomily before her, clouds gathering over the sky of her life, and all surrounding circumstances threatening a terrible storm.

CHAPTER IV.

FROM THE DEAD.

THE person encountered by Mr. Woodham in Palace Gardens walked with a firm free step past Holyrood House, and turned in at the gates of that less pretentious residence Mr. Lassils had entered, with his strangely-made acquaintance, on the night of Lady Moffat's ball.

He opened the door with a latch-key and went straight through the hall to the same small room to which, on the occasion referred to, he introduced his visitor. For, indeed, seen in the light diffused over the apartment by two candles, he proved to be the individual who had stood afar off, looking at the dancers, listening to the music. He seemed worn and worried; and his face bore a wearied expression, though it brightened at sight of an elderly lady, who sat in an armchair drawn near the fire, knitting.

'I did not expect to find you still up, aunt,' he said, taking a seat at a little distance from the hearth.

'I thought you might wish to speak to me,' she answered. 'I am not much help to you, I know; but still—'

'You are all the help I have,' he interrupted. 'There is no one in whom I can confide save you. No person in the world may ever feel with me in this matter as you do.'

'That is true,' she said; 'for your sorrow is my shame. We cannot look for any news yet, I suppose.'

'I have news,' he answered, handing her a letter; 'did you ever see that writing before?'

The old lady put on her spectacles and peered curiously at the superscription; then she took an enclosure out of the envelope and glanced at the few words traced upon it.

After that she lifted her eyes and gazed at her companion in amazement.

'Mira!' she exclaimed.

'Mira assuredly,' he answered. 'You see what she says: "*Mr. Palthorpe's child died years ago in America.*"'

'Died years ago,' repeated the old lady. 'Do you believe it?'

'Not for a moment,' he answered; 'but just look at that letter again attentively. Notice the quality of the paper, the thickness of the envelope, the delicate perfume hanging about it. Should you say there was any poverty where that note came from?'

'Not poverty, perhaps,' she answered hesitatingly.

'I do not think I ever told you what Doctor Dilton said,' went on her companion; 'in fact I know I did not, because I could not bear the idea of harbouring his suggestions; but something in that note seems, I do not know in the least why, to emphasise his words. "There is only one man in England," he said, "or in the world, who can tell you all about your wife and child, and that man is Mr. Hay. Find him, and you will hold the clue you want."'

'And shall you try to find him?'

'I have tried,' was the answer, 'not because I really attached importance to Doctor Dilton's suspicion, but because I wished to leave no stone unturned before advertising. There is no such person to be found in London. I have gone to every one

bearing that name both in the City and in the Court Directory, and in the Suburban Directories, and I can neither come upon him or any trace of him.'

'He may be dead,' said the lady.

'He may. Thousands of people, millions of people have had time to die in twenty years.'

'And yet she is alive.'

'And yet she is alive.'

He repeated these words slowly and bitterly, stooping forward and looking down at the carpet as he spoke, his hands clasped loosely together, his whole attitude one of the deepest despondency, a world of misery in his tone.

'Yes, she is alive, evidently,' he said, as if he had not previously uttered almost those identical words; and he rose and took a hurried turn up and down the small apartment, coming at last close to the fireplace and leaning against the chimneypiece while he went on,

'I wonder why I want to know where she is, what she is doing? What can it profit me to learn anything about her? Why am I raking up the old shame and the old sorrow? Can you enlighten me?

How is it that since I have returned to England this time every thought, every effort, seems directed to that one object ?'

Do you recognise him now, dear reader, as he stands bending an earnest gaze upon his companion, as he lays one hand on the mantelshelf and stretches out the other with a gesture of weary appeal ?

He is more than twenty years older; he has worked hard; he has lived by the sweat of his brow; he has been scorched by many suns; worn by the rigour of labour; there is gray sprinkled amongst the brown of his thick hair; a beard and moustache almost cover the lower part of his face; the frank blue eyes have an expression in them absent when he lay at death's door far east in London. Yet it is the same man, with the same loyal tender heart beating in his bosom, who, in his younger days, went into the battle of life so bravely and with so rare a courage, and set about his poor home flowers fair and sweet, if humble—typical of the garlands of happiness and contentment with which his cheerful honest nature would have wreathed and beautified the lowly lot he had chosen, all for love.

Yes, the same: the man Sir John Moffat believed had gone down in the great ocean years and years previously; who all in the golden summer weather returned to Sunnydown Farm, to find his wife faithless, his child gone, hope dead, every bud and bloom and fruit of existence lying scattered in the dust.

The same, back in England once more; a rich man now, by what seemed the merest accident lodged in Palace Gardens, so near wife and child and quondam friend, three minutes' walk would have sufficed to take him inside the doors of Holyrood House; and yet so far off in the tangled wilderness of London life he might, for all he knew or guessed of their whereabouts, have been still at the other side of the world.

'I never wish to see her more,' he said, finding his companion did not answer; 'and yet I feel as if I should know no peace of mind or rest of body till I discover where she is, and what she is doing. How is this? can you explain it?'

'You must desire to find your child,' Miss Aggles —for it was indeed she—said evasively.

'Why,' he persisted, 'if she be not dead she has most probably grown up like her mother.'

'No,' interrupted Miss Aggles vehemently, 'never! She could not so change; the little one was the sweetest, tenderest, softest—'

She stopped suddenly, and he remained silent, lost in thought, wandering amid a maze of conjecture.

'I was happier in the Bush,' he said at last. 'I wish we had never returned to England.'

'It is right you should try to trace Rachel,' she replied; 'and in justice to yourself you ought also to find out what Mira is doing.'

'Why?' he asked.

'Because—' she paused for an instant, and then went on firmly, 'you are not yet an old man; you may want to form fresh ties for yourself. Why should you not?'

'Do you mean marry again?' he inquired.

'Well, yes, that is what I do mean.'

He shook his head sorrowfully.

'I have no heart,' he answered. 'I think it broke that February day when I found the wife for whose sake I had sacrificed so much would give up

nothing for me—meant, weak and sick as I still was, to let me go alone across the sea.'

Miss Aggles did not speak, she only looked at him with a sympathy truer than any words could have been.

'The pain of it hurts me still at times,' he went on, with a little hurry in his voice. 'I am sure I cannot tell why, for I knew what she was before that day. I look back, do you know, and think of it all as if I were quite another person, pitying the young husband just creeping back from death. Foolish, ridiculous, is it not? But O, how I loved her once! how happy I thought I could be with her even in the humblest home!'

'And she cared for nothing but herself,' said Miss Aggles; 'not for the old man who was proud of her; not for me, who tended her in every illness she ever knew; not for servant or animal about the farm; not for you, who gave up all your prospects for her; not for the child she bore. Very sure am I, wherever she is or whatever she is doing, she has no thought or care or trouble but for herself.'

He did not make any reply. Though she had

stripped every green leaf, and left the branch of his existence destitute of even one bud of promise, he could not speak against the woman who had once lain in his bosom and dwelt in his heart. When he began to think of the wretchedness of the end, the brightness of the beginning came before him with its glistening sunbeams, its wealth of beauty, its dreams of hope, its glamour of youth and romance and love!

'Has Madge been out to-day?' he asked after a pause, evidently desirous of changing the subject.

'No,' answered Miss Aggles dryly. 'Her father has not been well; she said she did not wish to go out.'

'Lassils called?' he inquired.

'Yes, he came this evening, and stayed for a cup of coffee.'

'How do matters proceed?'

'They do not proceed at all,' said Miss Aggles.

'On which side do they halt?'

'Not on his, you may be sure,' answered Miss Aggles. 'He is willing enough, anxious enough too, for the affair to be settled.'

'I wish it was settled; then we might leave England, or at all events London.'

'Take my advice,' said Miss Aggles, 'and do not leave London till you have exhausted every possible means to find your wife.'

'I have no intention of relinquishing the quest now,' he answered. 'The plunge has been made, and I must swim on to the end. It will be through strange waters, though, I am afraid,' he added, as he opened the door for Miss Aggles to pass out.

All that night long he lay awake; it was quite morning before he fell into a troubled sleep, and when he got up and went down to breakfast he felt, as he himself said, more tired than he had ever done after a hard day's work on the sheep-run.

'I am sure I often wish I was back there,' he remarked, sipping his tea reflectively.

The words might not be much, but they were uttered in a tone of such conviction that a very pretty young lady who made the third at table raised her eyes and looked at him inquiringly.

Then, though he never glanced back at her, and there seemed nothing whatever to have caused the

emotion, she coloured painfully, and fell into a train of apparently unpleasant thought.

'I do not think you would care much for the sheep-run now,' commented Miss Aggles; 'it might be all very well while you were making money, but—'

'The pleasure was in making the money,' he answered; 'when once it is made there is nothing more, it seems to me, to do or to live for.'

'You ought to be poor again, and then you would value your present advantages,' said the elder woman rebukingly.

'I wish I were poor, but not for the reason you suggest,' he replied. 'What is your opinion, Madge?' he added, addressing his opposite neighbour. 'Do you, in the middle of all this civilisation, ever regret the pleasant days we passed in Australia, that can come back no more?'

'O, that they could!' murmured the lady. 'We were so happy then; so much happier than we can ever be again. I wish we had never come to London.'

'Not even for the sake of the eighty thousand?' he asked playfully.

'Not for eighty times eighty thousand. With all my heart I wish my godfather had never made a will, or that his next-of-kin was in peaceable possession of the money.'

'In the latter case, what would Mr. Lassils do?' he asked.

'I have not the slightest idea.'

'What would you both, then, do when you are married? to amend my question,' he persisted.

'I shall never marry Mr. Lassils,' she answered.

Mr. Palthorpe looked towards Miss Aggles in amazement, but she shook her head as if warning him to maintain silence.

'Poor Mr. Lassils,' he said gravely, and proceeded to finish his breakfast, thinking of his first acquaintance with that gentleman, and speculating whether the very pretty little girl, of whom he had on the night of the great party in Palace Gardens spoken with such enthusiasm, could have half so tender and sweet and attractive a face as that possessed by Madge Graham. 'And I should not be surprised if she refuse to marry him after all,' he considered. 'Yet it would be a pity, for I do not

think Lassils is a bad sort of fellow; and really eighty thousand pounds is a nice trifle towards housekeeping.'

As he proceeded that day upon the search which had engaged him almost constantly since his return to England, he thought much and mournfully of the circumstances which induced General Graham to leave Australia.

'Till the news of that legacy came we never thought of coming to this weary old country. We were happy out there;' and his mind went back to his first acquaintance with the General and his daughter, and the pleasant friendship which had existed among them since.

Walking up Chancery-lane in the afternoon on his way to Lincoln's-inn-fields, he was accosted by a gentleman, who hurried along the narrow pavement after him.

'So here you are!' cried a cheery voice in his ear. 'I meant to have looked you up this evening in Palace Gardens.'

'Why, doctor, who would have thought of seeing you in London?' answered the other; and then the

pair shook hands cordially, and Doctor Dilton explained he had been called all of a sudden to town to take charge of his cousin's practice. 'I shall be near you,' he added, 'in Kensington. I am going there now. There was a little business I wanted to see a lawyer about, and so I made my way first into Serjeants' Inn. Well, and how are you?'

Mr. Palthorpe said he was well.

'Ay, you are a different-looking fellow from what you were when I first saw you,' said the doctor. 'I did not then think your chances were good of making old bones. Lord! to think that is more than twenty years ago, and it seems like yesterday!'

'Come, and let us have some dinner together,' suggested Mr. Palthorpe; and nothing loth the doctor accompanied him to a quiet tavern off Fleet-street, where many a celebrity in bygone times ate his prime steak and drank his port brought to him in a bottle bearing some familiar seal.

'Now we are quiet and all to ourselves,' began the doctor at last, 'I want to ask you a question. Have you heard anything of the lady who was your wife?'

'Enough to convince me she is alive,' was the answer; and Mr. Palthorpe went on to tell what he had done, and why he at length felt constrained to insert the advertisement which produced so profound an impression in Holyrood House.

When he had quite finished, Doctor Dilton shook his head.

'I think it was a false move,' he said. 'You ought not to have let her know you are alive and in England.'

'Why not?'

'Because it will induce her to keep out of your way. You remember the advice I gave you when we talked this matter over before in Wales?'

'Yes; to look up Mr. Hay.'

'*Have* you looked up Mr. Hay?'

'I cannot discover any trace of him, either in the present or the past.'

'Humph!' said the doctor. 'Tell me exactly how you proceeded.'

Mr. Palthorpe told him.

'Bah!' exclaimed the other. 'You have gone about the whole thing in a half-hearted will-and-I-

won't sort of way. My belief is you do not want to succeed in your search.'

'I should like, at any rate, to know what has become of the child. As for the rest, after twenty years, what can it signify?'

'A man may as well be cured of a malady that has been afflicting him for twenty years as go on suffering for another twenty,' answered Doctor Dilton.

'Ay, but mine is incurable,' said Mr. Palthorpe.

'I am not so sure of that,' was the reply. 'At all events, it is clearly your duty, now you are in a position to push such inquiries, to ascertain whether your daughter stands in need of help or not. Just let us run over the facts of the case again. You only told them to me hurriedly down in Wales.'

'You understand, I suppose, I am not under any delusion. There could not have been a mistake on my part,' said Mr. Palthorpe.

'Well,' said the doctor dryly, 'such facts can scarcely be explained away; but now repeat the story to me. First, all of a sudden, Mrs. Palthorpe refused to accompany you to Australia.'

'Yes, at the very last minute.'

'And you supposed she went to her relations at Sunnydown?'

'Yes, I left her with them, and it was arranged she should remain at the farm.'

'And in point of fact she never did so remain?'

'O yes, she did, for some months after Rachel was born; then all in a minute she said she must go to London. She went to London; and when she came back, stated she had obtained a situation in a milliner's establishment.'

'I see; and ostensibly she entered upon that situation. She might really too,' added the doctor musingly.

'She might, but I do not consider it likely. First or last, she never mentioned the name of the house where she was employed to her aunt.'

'I don't consider that proves much,' said Doctor Dilton judicially. 'Did she live in the house?'

'Impossible to say. She did not live at the address to which her letters were directed.'

'How do you know that?'

'A neighbour called to see her there, and could not find her.'

'And all this time you were writing to her at her grandfather's?'

'Of course; I had not the slightest idea she was absent.'

'She wrote in reply as if at Ravelsmede?'

'Yes, and I think really was at the farm. She used to pay periodical visits to her relations—sometimes staying only a few hours.'

'Then we come to the time when the news of the loss of the North Wales reached England. What did she do then?'

'I do not know whether she wrote down at once or not; but at any rate she went to the farm shortly afterwards, and was very much vexed because her grandfather said she had lost her looks.'

'And had she?' asked the doctor.

'Her aunt says not; but that she seemed restless and unsettled in her mind; strange altogether—in her ways and talk and manner.'

'Then what happened?'

'Why, she went away again; and after a very short time returned and stated she was going to be married and wanted Rachel. Neither aunt nor

grandfather would part with the child; and it was agreed she should go back to London and show her intended husband a letter Miss Aggles wrote refusing to let Rachel leave the farm.'

'I remember you telling me that. Go on.'

Mr. Palthorpe had paused for a moment, but now proceeded.

'On the morning of the day she was to have gone to town, she went out early and met the postman, who gave her the few lines I had written to Miss Aggles asking her to break the fact of my being alive to my wife—'

He stopped again, and Doctor Dilton this time made no comment.

'When her aunt came into the kitchen,' with an effort the deserted husband continued, 'she saw Mira burning something in the fire—it was in the summer-time, you understand—and looking white and worn and fit to drop. She went up-stairs'—he had to stop between the sentences containing so bitter a revelation—'and when Miss Aggles followed, she found her in a swoon. I know it was then she discovered—'

Doctor Dilton held up his hand; he comprehended that part of the story; he had gathered up that ravel of shame and disgrace and misery long before.

'And that same day,' he remarked, 'after promising she would remain over the night, she stole away, as I have heard, taking the child with her. From that time to this you have never heard tale nor tiding of her?'

'Save the letter bearing a foreign postmark, saying the child was well, and those two lines in answer to the advertisement, stating the child died long ago.'

'Ah!' commented the doctor; 'ah!'

'When I returned to England I was ill and penniless. My place in Australia would, I knew, be filled up immediately the tidings of my supposed death reached my employers. What with the horror of the shipwreck; the awful privations I endured before that outward-bound vessel rescued me; the mental agony I endured, fancying—well,' he went on firmly, 'fancying how much *she* would suffer; for, doctor, her letters *were* affectionate. What did you say?'

'Never mind what I said,' answered Doctor Dilton. 'I said the same thing to myself many a time when you were laid up due East. Ha! if ever man made a bad bargain, it was you. But you were telling me—'

'What I meant to tell was, that I had a long bad illness after my return; that I lay at Sunnydown Farm for long between life and death; that I was nursed as tenderly as mother ever nursed a child; that, during the winter following, the old man sank and died; that Miss Aggles agreed to follow my fortunes, and, scraping together what money she could, started with me for America. For years and years ill-luck pursued me. I tried place after place, scheme after scheme, till at length we found ourselves in Australia. There I had the great good fortune to save General Graham's life, and from that hour everything prospered with me. I was able to help him, he helped me. His health was so bad that, without the assistance of one younger and more vigorous than himself, he must have succumbed. His position was so good that he was competent to push me forward; and, as I told you, I

am now really a rich man. Money always comes too late.'

'Tut, tut, tut,' said Doctor Dilton, using the friendly exclamation he found of so much use amongst his farmer patients, 'nothing in this world is ever too late, except a tardy guest at dinner. Cheer up; and now let us be going; there is not another drop of wine in the bottle, and we must not have a second.'

CHAPTER V.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

'It never occurred to you, I suppose,' said Doctor Dilton a week later, once again addressing his patient of twenty odd years previously, 'to make inquiries at the house to which your wife's letters were addressed?'

'No,' was the answer. 'I do not think after such a length of time much could be ascertained from that quarter.'

Doctor Dilton looked at him thoughtfully and shook his head.

'You do not want to know the story, as I said before,' he remarked.

'I do wish to know it,' said Mr. Palthorpe; 'but candidly, I feel incompetent to follow the details which seem necessary. My solicitors wanted to employ a detective; but I could not bear the idea of baring the trouble of my life to a man of that kind.'

'I can understand your feelings,' was the reply. 'But just to show you how easily the matter might be unravelled if gone about in a proper manner, I may tell you I got the address from Miss Aggles and went to the house. Present tenant had been in it only five years; so there was nothing to do but try to find out the former occupier. Miss Aggles, if she ever knew, had forgotten her name; so I managed to obtain a sight of an old directory, and found she was a Mrs. Grimes. I traced her to Pentonville, and ascertained after five minutes' conversation that all letters which came to her addressed to Mrs. Palthorpe were readdressed to the care of *Mrs. Hay*, the Poplars, Wandsworth-road.'

Mr. Palthorpe started; the blood rushed into his face one moment, and then receding, left him pale as death; but he did not utter a word.

'You begin to see I was right,' said the doctor.

'There may have been a Mrs. Hay,' observed the unhappy man hesitatingly.

'Or there may not,' finished the doctor; 'at all events, if there were it is extremely unlikely your wife was acquainted with her. Having taken the

matter in hand—Miss Aggles urged me to do so, I ought to tell you—I thought I would see it out; and I therefore went to the Poplars, which is to let, by the way. It was more difficult to ascertain anything in that neighbourhood; but after a good deal of trouble I met a person, a nurseryman, who perfectly remembered a Mr. Hay living in the house, and directed me where to find a man that had worked for him as gardener. His description of Mr. Hay answered precisely to that of our Stratford friend; and if he had drawn your wife's portrait in oils, he could not have sketched a better likeness than he presented to me as that of Mrs. Hay.'

'If I could meet him, if I could only find him!' muttered Mr. Palthorpe huskily.

'I do not say now what I said before, that if you were able to do that you would find her,' said the doctor; 'for from what I heard of the life they led, of her temper, of her imperious ways, it is most unlikely the connection lasted longer than the break-up at the Poplars, which occurred about the time she went to Ravelsmede. Very possibly what she told her aunt about her intended marriage was true; but

then comes a puzzle as regards your child. Why should any man want another man's child?'

'It is all a mystery,' answered Mr. Palthorpe. 'Did you hear what Mr. Hay was?'

'Nothing more than that he had some business in the City, some business which kept him a good deal away from home. So far as I could gather, he did not live at the Poplars, only went backwards and forwards.'

'I will see it out now,' remarked Mr. Palthorpe; 'let what may come, I will see it out.'

'I think you ought,' was the answer, 'on every account;' and he wrung the hands of the man for whom he felt a sympathy to which he was incompetent to give expression—the man who, though he had so loyally staked 'all for love,' could not count the 'world well lost.'

Meantime there was a struggle going on in the mind of the master of Holyrood House which might well have moved the compassion even of an enemy.

In his repentance, as in his sin, the weakness which, unsuspected alike by himself and the world, was an integral part of his character entered so

largely as to prevent his coming to any decision concerning the course he ought to adopt. Swayed hither and thither, now determining to answer the advertisement, again assuring himself no good purpose could be served by reopening the old wound, inclining one moment to the belief Rachel need never know he was not her father, and the next remembering that any hour circumstances might arise which would necessitate confession, he passed the hours and the days and the nights in a state of unrest and misery a stronger mental organisation could not have supported.

Not so Lady Moffat. Having, as she believed, thrown suspicion off the track and stopped further inquiry, she recovered her health and spirits. Only one change was noticeable—she would not walk; no, not a step beyond the precincts of her own home. Wherever she wanted to go she went in a close carriage, with a thick veil tied down over her face. There had been times previously when, without any apparent cause, and, indeed, without actual cause, she elected to take the latter precaution; and her ladyship's 'vagaries,' as her servants called her

changes of mind and temper, were so well understood in the household that no fresh freak was likely to attract attention. Even Miss Banks did not consider her latest fancy peculiar. That lady had always thought it strange Lady Moffat did not use her carriage more; and she felt by no means sorry for a change of tactics which enabled her to go everywhere she wished without, as she tersely put the matter, 'wetting the sole of her shoe.'

One other alteration, of which the world was not aware, came about. Though Lady Moffat's manner towards Rachel in public underwent little change—indeed the habit of snubbing her elder daughter had grown so confirmed she could not have broken herself of it—she was constantly seeking her society, trying to propitiate her, watching her face with anxiety.

'Dear papa,' said the girl one morning to Sir John, 'you can't think how kind mamma is to me often now. Some day, do you know, I even fancy she may get fond of me. What have I said? Have I hurt you, papa? I thought you would be pleased,' she asked, bewildered; for he was looking at her

with eyes that held a sort of terror in their expression. Why should his wife so suddenly change her tactics? What mystery lay underneath that advertisement? Who wanted tidings of the dead man's child? Was he standing in her light? Was it his duty at all hazards to say, 'This is Thomas Palthorpe's daughter. She is no kith or kin of mine'?

'I am glad, Rachel,' he answered after a second's pause; but he trembled so violently he had to lay down the paper-cutter he held in his hand. 'Anything which makes you happier—' and then his voice died away, and he rose and walked towards the window, to hide the trouble in his face from her loving gaze.

'You are ill,' she said, 'or you are in some trouble rather; may I not know what it is? Has anything gone wrong about money? I have always felt this to be an unlucky sort of house.'

'My trouble would have found me in any house,' he replied, unclasping the arms she had wound around his neck. 'Don't cry, dear; it may all come right some day. It is nothing about

money; would that it were! O, would to God it were!'

'Can't I help you, papa?' she asked. 'I am not of much use certainly; but I would do anything, anything on earth for you.'

'I believe you would, *now*,' he answered, laying an unintentional emphasis on the last word.

'Now!' she repeated; 'do you think I would not always?'

'You will have other ties some day,' said Sir John evasively.

'No other tie,' she answered firmly, though she blushed as she spoke, 'could separate me from you. Say you are sure of that, papa?'

'I am sure you think so, dear,' he replied; 'but O, Rachel, how can any of us say how we may feel, what we shall do, even an hour hence? We can answer for the present, which is ours; but we cannot answer for the future, nor for what we shall be or do or feel in it.'

She looked at him with sad tender wistfulness.

'I think I could answer for myself,' she said. 'Of course you know better than I; but yet—no,

you don't know better about this, papa,' she added, suddenly flinging herself on his breast and bursting into tears. 'No time, no tie, no anything could change my love for you. If it ever comes to be tested you will see; yes, indeed, you will see.'

Ah, she did not know! How would it be if she ever did know? Sir John felt the very intensity of her affection weighing down his soul. Every word she spoke pierced him like a sword. His heart, his poor tortured heart could bear no more; he put her gently from him, and without further word or look left the room.

As he did so Simonds advanced to say Mr. Woodham was in the library.

'He is sorry to call so early, Sir John, but wishes to speak to you particularly;' a statement which Mr. Woodham's first words confirmed.

'I have to apologise for intruding at such an untimely hour,' he began, stretching out his hand; 'but I am starting to-day for Florence, and I wanted to say something to you before I go. You must promise not to be very indignant at what I am going to tell you,' he added, smiling a little nervously.

'Won't you sit down?' asked Sir John, taking a chair himself. His tone was cold and his manner constrained. 'Now, what is it?' and as he spoke those last words Mr. Woodham knew he was nerving himself to meet some expected blow.

'Well, without beating about the bush,' said Mr. Woodham, feeling it better to plunge into the matter at once, 'I love your daughter.'

'Love—Rachel?' repeated Sir John, feeling that though this was not precisely the 'something' he had expected at the moment, it served equally well to prove the beginning of the end was at hand.

'I know I am not in any worldly respect—'

'Stop a moment, please,' interrupted Sir John, placing his elbow on the table, and shading his eyes with one hand, while he raised his other with a gesture of entreaty.

Mr. Woodham paused. He remained perfectly silent for a few minutes, which seemed to both men almost as the length of hours. Then Sir John, uncovering his face and revealing once again that gray pallor the clergyman had noticed before, said quietly,

'I beg your pardon; pray proceed.'

'If you are ill, some other time. You would, perhaps, prefer—' hesitated Mr. Woodham.

'I am not ill—in body,' was the reply; 'and as for time, there is none like time present. You were saying—'

'That in a worldly point of view I am aware my proposals must seem to you in every respect undesirable. But I have received this morning a telegram which may materially alter my position; and I therefore want to obtain a conditional promise from you that if hereafter circumstances should enable me to offer your daughter such a home as—'

'Tell me exactly what you mean,' said Sir John, as he, usually ready enough of speech, paused and hesitated.

'Well, I scarcely like to say what I do mean,' answered Mr. Woodham, confused; 'and yet I cannot leave England without speaking to you. The telegram from Florence requests me instantly to go to my cousin, who is dangerously ill. If he—'

'If he died, you would be Lord Chesunt?' suggested Sir John, who was now by far the more self-possessed of the two.

'I should be in a position to maintain a wife, which I am not now,' amended the clergyman, vexed a little at having his own ideas presented in such hard colours before him. 'I do not want him to die. I never expected to step into his shoes. I never intended to ask you just yet for your daughter's hand; but as matters stand I thought—since many things may happen during my absence—that I would tell you I feel an affection for Rachel I never felt for any woman before, and that I well know I never can feel for any woman again, and ask your consent to trying to win a favourable answer from her in the future should it so chance that—that—'

'I understand,' said Sir John; and then he relapsed into silence.

'I do not desire to bind you by any promise, even a conditional one,' Mr. Woodham was beginning. 'Now that you know my feelings and wishes—'

'I will answer you directly,' interrupted Sir John; and, rising, he walked over to the bookshelves and stood looking at nothing for about the

space of time in which one might have slowly counted twenty.

Then he came back and resumed his seat. Stretching his hands, which were tightly clasped, over the table, he began speaking in a low voice and in a dull monotone which was sadly impressive.

'Rich or poor, Mr. Woodham, a curate or a lord, you are, of all men, the man I would desire to see Rachel's husband. If she were to become your wife, I should prefer you, however, as you are; for I doubt if she would be so happy as a great lady as she might find herself in a humbler walk of life. She has no high ideas; she is simple in her tastes. But why do I talk this way? She can never be your wife—never.'

'Not be my wife? For what reason?'

'Because you will not marry her.'

'I will not marry her?' again repeated Mr. Woodham.

'No; not when you have heard what I have to say. You remember the other night I told you there was a person I knew troubled in mind; that he sought advice; that he wanted you to know his

secret. That man was myself;' and Sir John, having made this leap, stopped suddenly, as if frightened, and drew a long gasping breath.

'I felt sure of it,' murmured Mr. Woodham to himself.

'It is a story,' went on Sir John, 'of sin and sorrow—of sin and sorrow; but you must hear it.'

'No,' answered Mr. Woodham, all his former hesitation, all his perplexed uncertainty, disappearing in a moment—'no, I must *not* hear it—at least, not now, not till I am your daughter's husband. If hereafter you will give her to me, I will receive your gift as the greatest man could bestow. Whatever her birth may be, whatever of sin and sorrow your life holds, can make no difference to me. Only give her to me with her own free full consent. Let her come to me with her sweet shy face, and put her hand in mine, and vow before God's altar to be my true and loving wife; and then, Sir John, no matter what your trouble is, I will share it with a son's true heart, help you if I can, and bear whatever part of the burden needs to fall upon me unrepiningly. I say this from the depths of my soul, as

truly and sincerely as I hope you will have help from the Source of all help, that the good Lord may have mercy and pity upon you.'

'Amen,' said Sir John, in a broken whisper. 'Amen.'

CHAPTER VI.

IN SIR JOHN'S OFFICE.

Sir John Moffat and Mr. Woodham left Holyrood House together, and went down Palace Gardens, talking as they walked.

Sir John was going into the City, and Mr. Woodham said he would accompany him for a short way. The hour chanced to be much later than that the owner of Mr. Seaton's old residence usually started for town; but he had not, on this morning, any particular business requiring his presence at the office, and, accordingly, the pair turned in between the red-brick pillars, which modestly indicate the abode of Royalty, and strolled leisurely past the red-brick palace, that has such a charming look of home about it, and straight on by the broad walk to that piece of water which bears so strong a resemblance to another piece of water in the avenue at Bushey Park.

As they walked under the trees, that, if power of speech were given them, could tell so many a story of human wrong and human woe, Mr. Woodham eager, though thoughtful, Sir John *distrait* and melancholy beyond his wont, the same person the clergyman had jostled in the darkness met both gentlemen face to face.

He did not know either, and had actually passed them by, when Sir John, in answer to some remark of his companion, happened to speak.

Instantly the stranger in London paused, startled. They were moving from him; but he turned upon his step and followed them, not near enough to overhear what they were saying, but sufficiently close to keep them well in sight.

On Sir John paced, in his quiet measured way, totally unconscious that any one was dogging him. A policeman touched his hat to the 'worthy knight,' as he chanced to be called by many City people; but the stranger did not pause to make any inquiries. He meant to satisfy his own mind; to ascertain if he had been attracted by aught more than a mere trick of fancy. If it were the man! O Lord! if

after all these many years he had found him at last! What then? He gasped almost as he asked himself involuntarily this question; but he answered it instantly: then he would know for certain. If this were the man, he should learn, without a doubt, whether he held the clue of his wife's disappearance.

Supposing he had nothing to do with it or her? So much the better for him. Supposing Doctor Dilton right? He would hunt him down, let him be as rich as he might—as highly considered as man could be; he would strip off the mask, and expose him to the world as a cheat, a hypocrite, and a villain.

The more he looked at the figure preceding him, so stiff and solemn in its movements, with so little of ease in limb or action—at the profile, changed and aged though it was—the more certain he felt that he beheld the person so long looked for, so constantly thought of, in the flesh at last.

But he did not mean to make any mistake; he intended to be sure before he took even so much of action as was involved in speech.

In his heart he felt certain that there, walking before him, was the man who had stayed his feeble feet stumbling across the threshold of the valley of the shadow, who had, with his strong arm, supported him back to life, who had acted the part of the Good Samaritan to one worsted in the battle of existence.

Had it all been acting, all a premeditated plan? The eyes that were so like Rachel's fastened themselves upon the gray hair, the wan face, the weary expression, and, in spite of themselves, softened as they looked.

More in keeping with the widest and most silent charity was the look of the man walking on in front, than any deep-laid plan, any nefarious plot against his fellow's honour, any long train of treachery lighted and exploded at the end.

Following behind, and noting each turn of the head, each gesture, each movement, Thomas Palthorpe read the true nature of John Moffat aright.

He could not believe him a deceiver, a false finished hypocrite. He did believe he had sent the money; but he found himself fighting against the

idea he had meant aught save the truest kindness towards him. This man could not be a sinner—this man, with his calm manner, composed demeanour, earnest mode of talking. The thing was impossible. Some other one; some person his heartless wife had met, unknown to himself; some other who had caused her pulses to throb quicker for his coming, her face to brighten, her smiles to dimple her fair cheeks. Ah, me! ah, me! till the great judgment-day how shall we ever clearly understand each other, or comprehend what a mysterious trouble man's complex nature is here even to himself—how he wrestles against his own impulses; how he swears he will not be suspicious; how he is borne out on seas of higher meaning one moment, surely to be washed back by waves of doubt to the earthly shores his better self abhors?

On, and still on, passion gaining the mastery now, reason arguing in calmest accents then; an impulsive nature swaying thither and hither, as it tracked distractedly, not merely the footsteps of one long sought for, but also the devious twists and turnings of a past so obscure, it had oftentimes seemed

the mysteries it held must for ever remain unsolved; thus they—the injured and the injurer—walked through the prettiest park of London, pacing both patiently forward to an end which they could not even dimly imagine.

Clearly between Mr. Woodham and Sir John the conversation had become engrossing, because the clergyman pursued his way to Hyde Park Corner without a thought of the distance he should have to retrace, while Sir John did not seem to consider he might have found an omnibus long before he reached Apsley House.

An omnibus was preferably this rich man's favourite conveyance for reaching the City. He might have driven thither in his own carriage, or mounted a steed warranted to combine all equine virtues, or paid cab-fares; all the conveniences and luxuries poor folks consider desirable were within his reach, and yet he chose that at which those not Fortune's favourites are apt to turn up a scornful nose.

With the air of one quite accustomed to such exercises, he climbed modestly to a seat on the knife-board, scarcely noticing as he did so that a heavily-

bearded man followed his example, and took his place on the other side.

'I shall hear from you, I suppose, before you return from Florence,' said Sir John to his companion, shaking hands as they paused upon the kerb-stone.

'I will write to you frequently,' said the other.

That was all; but it seemed to the hearer enough.

At the corner of Prince's-street Sir John alighted; and, passing by the Bank of England, made his way through many a short cut and out-of-the-way court to his office.

In the City, it was patent to the man who followed him, his foot was on his native heath. At every step, almost, he encountered some friend, acquaintance, or inferior; greetings were exchanged, hats touched; clearly a man well known; a person whose whereabouts there ought not to have been any difficulty in discovering.

'He is a partner, perhaps, though, in some great house,' thought the bearded individual, who had his memories connected with the City also.

No one in the olden days had ever seemed delighted to see him when he walked abroad, through twisting alleys and narrow lanes and busy thoroughfares; not even a beggar deemed it worth while to touch his hat to a fellow-creature so palpably impecunious as the then young clerk.

He had found the modern El Dorado paved for him with exceptionally hard flints instead of golden nuggets; he had walked those same side-paths tired and dispirited and mortified and sore perplexed. But then life was before him; now, twenty long years, taken out of the best part of existence, lay behind; twenty years a woman's perfidy had overclouded; twenty years he would have given up his money, his position, to recall.

'For I ought to have known the best or the worst then,' he considered. 'All these years I have been going about like a horse with a clog fastened to his foot; like the horse, too, scarcely feeling the impediment till now, when, looking back, I perceive how it has prevented my progress, and hampered every step of my way.'

Sir John turned into a narrow lane, then crossed

a paved court, took his way up a narrow passage, and entered a building at the further end. At the corner of the passage a bank-messenger touched his hat respectfully; and a little further on a ticket-porter acknowledged his presence more obsequiously still.

'I don't believe he knows anything about the matter,' decided the man who followed in his wake with long loose strides; 'but I will go in and speak to him, anyway.'

With this intention he went up to the entrance, and was about to push open the inside door, when his eye chanced to catch the name engraved on a great brass plate, stretching across the width of the mahogany:

'Sir John H. Moffat.'

'Moffat won't spell Hay, however you work it,' he considered. 'No matter; if it be as I suspect, he is partner, or something of that kind;' and so thinking, he pushed open the door and walked in.

He found himself in a quiet outer office, where not more than half a dozen clerks were seated at different desks. Going up to the oldest, a white-

headed respectable-looking bookkeeper, he asked if 'Mr. Hay was within.'

'There is no Mr. Hay here, sir,' answered the clerk.

'Surely I saw him enter this office a minute since?'

'Not to my knowledge, sir. We have not any one of that name in our employment.'

'Do you do business with any person of that name?'

'No, sir.'

Puzzled, more puzzled than he would have cared to confess, the man who had been so long absent from London, after tendering some vague apology for his intrusion, left the office, and wandered out into the passage. He took a turn round the court, and then, coming again upon the ticket-porter, asked,

'Do you remember a gentleman who passed up here just now?'

'Who was he?'

'That is just what I want to know; a gentleman with gray hair, who stoops a little.'

The porter shook his head, and answered,

'Such a many passes.'

'But you touched your hat to the gentleman I mean, and he went into that office at the top there.'

'O, him? That is Sir John Moffat.'

'Are you sure?'

'Sure?' repeated the other contemptuously; 'of course I'm sure. I have known him go up and down this here place for a matter of thirty year and better. Here he comes, if that is the gentleman you mean.'

As they stood, Sir John passed by quite close. 'Yes, that is the gentleman I mean,' said the stranger who had followed him from Kensington.

'Then that is Sir John Moffat; and a better gentleman you would not meet if you walked London streets for a day,' said the porter genially, as he pocketed the half-a-crown he had feared might not be forthcoming.

Without further delay or inquiry Sir John's shadow hurried out of the court and followed him. For at least an hour he tracked his steps hither and

thither: paused when he paused, waiting about the doors of great offices till Sir John, having finished his business, emerged into the street again; loitered if he stopped to speak to an acquaintance; and at length found himself occupying an adjacent box in a very out-of-the-way and very old-fashioned tavern. quite unlike any of the modern luncheon-bars or dining-rooms, where Sir John, having ordered a steak, potatoes, and half a pint of bitter, took off his hat, and, totally unconscious of observation, began to glance over the newspaper brought him by the waiter.

'What for you, sir?' asked the man, bustling into the box occupied by the stranger.

For a moment the person so addressed hesitated; then laying down a shilling, and murmuring something about a forgotten engagement, he went down the stairs, made his way to the nearest main thoroughfare, hailed a hansom, and bade the driver go as fast as he could to Kensington.

He found Doctor Dilton within. In two minutes he told him all he had done; in another he entreated his friend to return with him to the City.

'I am sure, and yet I am doubtful,' he said. 'Should you know him, do you think?'

'Among a thousand,' was the answer.

'Then come along. You will stand by me, won't you?'

'Yes, I will stand by you,' Doctor Dilton replied; but for all that he did not seem to relish the expedition.

They drove back straight to the City, and, dismissing the cab at the entrance of the narrow alley, walked up to the little court, crossed it, and reached the passage leading to Sir John's office.

'What a queer out-of-the-way spot!' remarked Doctor Dilton, speaking indifferently, though indeed he felt he had never been engaged upon any business in all his life he liked less.

'Yes,' answered his companion shortly.

They were now close upon the heels of some discovery, and the man's heart, crowded with the memories and the fears and the agony of twenty years previously, beat so fast he felt as if its throbbing would suffocate him ere he reached the door.

As they went up the passage they met the ticket-

porter, who touched his hat as respectfully as though Sir John himself were coming along, bearing his weight of wealth and honours with him.

The short day was drawing to its close. The gas was already lighted in all the offices; a sense of dreamy unreality seemed to steal over the pair so unaccustomed to the City. They were bound on a very serious mission, and yet, had they been walking in their sleep, they would have felt their mission more actual than was the case.

'Is Sir John Moffat in?' asked Doctor Dilton, going up to one of the clerks. Remembering the morning's inquiries, his companion deemed it best to leave all preliminaries to him.

'Yes, Sir John is in,' answered the person addressed.

'Can I see him?' asked the doctor.

The clerk did not know. He got down off his stool and went and held a whispered conference with the elderly bookkeeper previously mentioned, then he came back.

'Sir John is engaged just now,' he explained.

'When will he be disengaged?'

'I am sure I can't say. It is a very bad time to see him; and this is foreign-post night also—and—'

Doctor Dilton moved back a step and spoke to his companion, who remained near the door.

'I *must* see him,' was the answer; which reaching the clerk, he asked if Mr. Bickton would do.

'No,' Doctor Dilton was quite sure Mr. Bickton would not do.

'Well, then, sir, I am very much afraid I must trouble you to call again, or write, because—'

'You had better refer the matter to Sir John himself,' said the gentleman standing near the door, stepping forward. 'I do not think he would very greatly thank you for compelling me to state my business to him on the door-step, which I shall do if I fail to see him in his office.'

There was something in the tone and manner of this address which moved even the clerk, who happened, like all modern clerks, to be a very Cerberus for preventing intruders crossing the business threshold.

'Very well, sir,' he said resignedly. 'If you give me your name, and state the nature of the matter you have called about, I will see what can be done; but I am very much afraid—'

'Say a gentleman from Australia wishes to see him on private business,' interrupted Doctor Dilton diplomatically.

'I am sorry to say I must trouble you for your card,' persisted the clerk.

'Bless my soul!' exclaimed the doctor pettishly. 'Any one would think this was Buckingham Palace, and you Lord Chamberlain;' but his companion produced a card.

'Here,' he said, 'give this to your master; and remember you tell him it is private business—strictly private.'

The clerk took the card and looked at it; then he went away into some remote region, for they heard the closing of two or three doors behind him.

Doctor Dilton and his friend stood together by the door, and at a distance from the clerks who remained.

'I happened to have one of the General's cards in

my case,' said the gentleman from Australia, in a low voice, 'and I sent that in.'

'If it should not be he after all?' suggested the doctor.

'I am sure it is he; but you will know,' was the answer.

'Yes, I shall know,' agreed Doctor Dilton.

'If you step this way, Sir John will see you,' said the clerk, returning almost on the instant.

Following him they passed through a second door, along a passage, through a third door, then across a room out of which another opened.

In this inner apartment, behind a table on which a shaded lamp was placed, sat a gentleman engaged in writing. As his visitors entered he bowed, half rose, and, motioning them to be seated, resumed his chair.

The clerk left the room, carefully closing the door behind him. There was a moment's silence, which Sir John broke by asking, 'What can I do for you, gentlemen?'

As he looked up and spoke the light fell full upon his face, which had previously been in shadow.

Then Doctor Dilton, turning towards his companion, gave an almost imperceptible nod. Unblinded by passion, undistracted by doubt, he, at least, could have sworn to him amongst ten thousand.

'I want you to tell me where my wife is.'

Strange as the words were, the way in which they were spoken was stranger still. They were tumbled out one on the top of another, as if the man who uttered them hastened to deliver himself of the sentence ere his breath failed altogether.

A very desperate-looking man, with his thick hair tangled over his forehead, his face brown with exposure to the sun, his heavy beard and moustache, his anxious eyes and distressed expression.

'There is some mistake, I think,' suggested Sir John mildly, glancing at Doctor Dilton; for indeed at the moment he believed there was this much of a mistake, that one of his visitors was mad and the other his keeper.

'No, there is no mistake,' replied the stranger, whose hand grasped the edge of the table convulsively.

'I really am at a loss,' said Sir John, once again glancing towards Doctor Dilton, 'to imagine what you mean. How should I know anything about your wife? I never heard your name till within the last five minutes;' and he looked towards the card which lay before him on the table.

'That is not my name,' explained the other, following the direction of Sir John's eyes. 'I only sent it in because your people would not take my message to you otherwise.'

In a dazed vacant sort of way Sir John turned from the speaker to Doctor Dilton. Some sort of recollection seemed dawning upon him, for he asked,

'Have I ever seen you before, sir?'

'Yes,' answered the doctor steadily.

'Where?' was the next question.

'In Stratford.'

'Stratford?' repeated Sir John. 'When?'

'When you went by another name and were called John Hay.'

Sir John did not answer immediately; he shrank back in his chair as if he had been struck, and cowered for a moment like one expecting another

blow. He covered his face with his hand and remained motionless, whilst a dead silence reigned within the room. None of the three spoke a word; the very stillness of death seemed there.

At length Sir John removed his hand and lifted his head slowly, wearily.

'You asked me some question a little while since,' he said, addressing his younger visitor; 'what was it?'

'I asked you to tell me where I should be likely to find Mira Palthorpe.'

'Who are you that want tidings of her? What is your name?'

'Palthorpe!'

Sir John stood up—he rose to his feet as if lifted to them by some galvanic shock.

'Palthorpe! what Palthorpe?' he gasped.

'Thomas Palthorpe—her husband.'

'It is false!' cried Sir John. 'Thomas Palthorpe was drowned—years ago.'

'Thomas Palthorpe was not drowned years ago,' said the other, rising also, 'for he is alive now—and I am he.'

'You? Great God!' and Sir John dropped into his chair again, trembling in every limb.

The blinds in his office were not drawn down, and he could see from the window near which he sat into the old graveyard, lying cold and desolate without. Something in its forlorn loneliness, its unspeakable solitary aspect, attracted his attention, and he sat staring out into the night, thinking of the bright sunshiny morning when he read that the North Wales had gone down, and looked out on the scene he was gazing at now. They who had fretted out their little day lay mouldering there and were at rest. Lord, what weary, weary days he had passed through since he looked amongst the list of survivors in the *Times!* along what a darksome road he had stumbled painfully to the present hour! Would the time ever come when he should be at rest? Before he was carried to his grave would the whole world know the secret he had hesitated to intrust to the keeping of a single man?

What was this sudden blow which had stricken him? He had imagined and considered almost every possible way in which trouble might come to him,

but he had never thought of this. That the sea should give up its dead! That after years and years a man, who through their long progress had made no sign, should come back from his grave! He did not think these things, for of all thought in its ordinary sense he was incapable; but he felt them. Fear, regret, dread, remorse, surged through his soul without sequence or connection; and yet, spite of all, had he been conscious of the fact, there was the sense of some great relief.

The worst had come; it had come in an even more terrible form to any anticipated; but in its train there followed one blessing. If this thing were true, the man lived, was there before him! Uriah had not been slain—his wife's husband, Rachel's father! Good Heavens, what a complication was here! Whose hand should disentangle the twists and knots of such a human skein?

Still looking out into the lonely churchyard, Sir John remained silent. Across the table the two men who had brought such news watched him intently; then Doctor Dilton, turning slightly towards his companion, shook his head, as one who should imply

the sinner had borne all the punishment he could endure at once.

But Mr. Palthorpe would not take the hint. His brow darkened, and his face set, as he met the glance of compassion Doctor Dilton's countenance assumed; and without further delay he said, in a tone which sounded harsh and cruel by reason of the very restraint he was putting on himself,

'I am waiting for such tidings as you can give me of the woman who was my wife.'

At the words Sir John turned upon the speaker.

'And if I could give you tidings of the woman you say was your wife, why should I? What can it signify to you whether she be living or not, happy or wretched, when all these years you have thought fit to leave her in ignorance of the fact of your existence?'

With an incredulous wonder in his face the man addressed looked at Sir John when he uttered these words.

'In ignorance?' he repeated, 'in ignorance?'

'Yes, you have never come back till now to tell man or woman of your rescue.'

'Did I not?' was the only comment. 'Did I not?'

'Did you?' asked Sir John.

'Yes,' the man who once lost all for love replied. 'I came back one golden summer to find I had no wife—that she had stolen my child; that she had broken an old man's heart; that she had brought dishonour on my own name. I came back to find she had intercepted the letter I wrote to her aunt, asking her to break the good news—I hoped then, in my folly, she might think it good news—to her niece. I crossed the threshold of an honest house only to learn she had left it, bearing with her a burden of shame. She knew well enough I had been saved, and so did you, Sir John Moffat, as the world calls you—so did you.'

'God is my witness I never knew, never dreamt. If I had—O, if I only had!'

'This interview shall not be prolonged,' broke in Doctor Dilton, who perhaps read accurately the signs of absolute physical distress in Sir John's worn face. 'Of all men on earth you two are the last who should discuss this matter to the end—to the bitter, bitter end,' he added, with terrible emphasis. 'You

have got the clue you wanted now, Mr. Palthorpe; come home with me. Sir John, I told you, if you remember, she was far too handsome. Tell your solicitor the whole story, *whatever it may be;* that is the best advice I can give you. Come away, Palthorpe—come away.'

'Not till he answers my question,' said Mr. Palthorpe, standing erect and fierce. 'He has taken wife and child from me—where are they?'

'Give me a week—two days,' entreated Sir John; 'it has been all so sudden.'

'At least,' persisted Mr. Palthorpe, upon whose arm Doctor Dilton had laid a warning hand, 'tell me is my wife living?'

'She is living,' answered Sir John doggedly.

'And my daughter—the little child who seems to have possessed every quality her mother lacked, who was her poor old grandfather's treasure—is she —dead?'

'*No, no,* no!' cried Sir John, as he turned his face to the lonely graveyard, to hide the tears he could no longer repress, which trickled slowly down his haggard cheek.

'Come away,' insisted Doctor Dilton earnestly. 'Don't try the man any more.' And half leading, half dragging, he drew Mr. Palthorpe out of the office, along the passage, and so finally into the street.

'There is more in this business than meets the eye,' he said, when he and his former patient were once again in a hansom, driving back to Kensington. 'I would not judge him yet if I were you.'

But Mr. Palthorpe did not answer. He was looking with weary thoughtful eyes out on the pageant of human life sweeping under the gaslight along the pavement—marvelling, perhaps, in some vague intangible sort of way (for he was not a man given either to analysis of his own motives or those of any other person), whether, amongst all the mysteries of science, anything could be found so mysterious, so unsatisfactory, so contradictory as a human being.

All the way to Palace Gardens he did not speak one word; in fact he had not a word to say. He felt stunned, not more by the success which had attended his efforts than by the effect which that success produced upon himself.

It was the mournfullest success man ever achieved. He had hunted his enemy down, and found him more full of sorrows, unless his face and manner were deceitful, than himself!

Worn, weary! He at least could not doubt that Sir John had found the bed of sin a most uneasy couch.

In a distant land Thomas Palthorpe had not spent solitary days and kept lonely vigils all in vain. He had talked, if dumbly, in a language his Maker understood, with God; and all the clamour of a great city—all the mightier loneliness of a populated town —- could not in a moment dull the lessons conned in a wilderness—the truths learned under the quiet stars, with no teacher save Nature, and the Bible he knew almost off by heart to point the way to the only lore which shall most certainly give a man peace at the last.

'I will see you to-morrow,' said Doctor Dilton, as they shook hands at parting.

'Thank you,' was the reply; and the man walked towards his temporary home with the gait and mien of one thoroughly wearied out.

'And such a woman,' thought Doctor Dilton, while the cab sped down Palace Gardens on its way a little further westward, 'to spoil the lives of two such men!' and his mind recurred not unfavourably to the contrast presented between his own little wife, who was not perhaps, in all respects, the wife he might have more happily chosen, and the physically magnificent creature who had wought so terrible a shipwreck for two of his own sex.

'I always distrusted her,' he considered, and yet even while he said that he shivered.

Supposing she had been civil to him—supposing she had vouchsafed to the medical attendant who was always in antagonism one of her rare smiles—how might he in such case have fared? Doctor Dilton knew enough of her sex and of his own to feel sure his repulsion to the woman owed its origin as much to dread as to aversion.

'She *was* far too handsome,' he repeated to himself, 'and I have no doubt she took that unfortunate Sir John completely captive. I wonder where she is; and I think I should like to know something more about him and his domestic relations.'

It seemed as though Doctor Dilton's wish had been heard and answered on the minute, for he was scarcely within his cousin's house before the servant said a messenger had been twice round from Holyrood House, wanting him to go there immediately.

'Holyrood House!' repeated Doctor Dilton, who had no associations with the name; 'where is Holyrood House?'

'Palace Gardens, sir. Sir John Moffat's place.'

'Who is ill there?' asked the doctor.

'Lady Moffat,' was the answer.

Doctor Dilton opened the hall-door. The cab which had brought him back from the City was still close by, as the driver had got down to make some alteration in his harness.

'Hi!' said the doctor, and in a moment more he was beside the man.

'Drive to Palace Gardens,' he went on, 'to Holyrood House, where Sir John Moffat lives.'

CHAPTER VII.

DOCTOR DILTON'S PATIENT.

SINCE he left Stratford Doctor Dilton had seen the inside of many a good house and noble mansion. He had made a name and reputation for himself, and worked up so good a practice that my lord at the castle and the squire at the hall were equally glad to hear the sound of his horse's hoofs when illness was beneath their roofs. The stately dignity of the one home and the comfortable luxury of the other were perfectly familiar to him, repeated as both chanced to be, in a greater or lesser degree, in all the houses of any pretensions he visited; but the lavish upholstery, the purely decorative style of furnishing which obtains in most London residences, struck him with unpleasant surprise. Wherever he turned it was the same story, with a difference—nothing seemed for use; everything was for show. The old houses, so suitable for families, were elbowed out of

court by staring edifices fit only for the reception of company. Rooms were not wanted for living in, but merely to fill with guests. Residences were not houses to which a man might return after the heat and turmoil of business to enjoy a slippered ease, to join in the gambols and pleasures of his children, but advertisements wherewith his credit might be maintained and the inevitable hour of bankruptcy deferred.

Doctor Dilton had vaguely imagined Sir John Moffat's house would have been free of the modern craze for rich discomfort; but the moment he set foot across its threshold he found out his mistake. Money — money—money! everything money could buy—everything the possession of wealth could suggest! Amazed he followed the butler across the hall, which gave promise of the wonders to follow. Still more amazed he looked around the drawing-room, where he was left alone while Simonds went to inform my lady's lady of his arrival.

'I suppose he married some City heiress,' considered Doctor Dilton, 'and that all this is her taste;' and as so he thought his mind recurred to

the long-ago past, when in the early morning, with the first beams of the rising sun glinting on the pinnacles of St. John's Church, he walked forth with the man he had seen again that afternoon, on a road which did not seem for him to have been strewn with roses.

The whole scene came before him vividly: the trees in the Grove and in the Green; the pure freshness of the morning air; the scents of the flowers that came to them as they walked; the look of the poor man's cottage, all set about with bud and blossom, clad in the beauty of climbers and creepers; Mrs. Palthorpe's sullen loveliness; the sickness unto death of the sick man; the kindly readiness with which the stranger, so suddenly pressed into an unwonted service, helped him to adjust the bandages; every detail of that fatal introduction passed through his mind, and once again he thanked God the woman had always seemed to him repellent rather than otherwise; that from the very first there arose an antagonism between them, which never abated, but, on the contrary, increased.

His reverie was interrupted by Winter, who came

to say that, if he pleased, her ladyship would feel obliged by his walking up-stairs.

'Is she confined to bed?' he asked, anxious to obtain some *carte du pays*, even though only of the slightest and sketchiest description.

'O no,' Winter answered; 'my lady never goes to bed, no matter how ill she may feel.'

'Was this a sudden attack?' he inquired. Foiled at one point, he thought he would try another.

'Very sudden, sir,' said the maid. 'My lady went to pay some visits, and had to return directly, she was taken so ill. She was greatly put out when she heard Doctor Merrard was away. Her ladyship feels he understands her so exactly.'

'Humph!' thought the doctor, not, perhaps, best pleased with this back-handed compliment; but he only said aloud, he trusted he might be able to prove of service.

'The doctor, my lady,' said Winter, cautiously entering Lady Moffat's dressing-room, and advancing towards an easy-chair, where the sufferer reclined, her head resting against the back, her face turned away from the light.

She did not take the slightest notice of Winter's statement, never moved nor stirred a finger. Winter, accustomed, however, to her ladyship's eccentricities, was not disturbed by this mode of receiving her information.

She placed a chair for the doctor near his patient; moved a little table on which stood water, sal volatile, red lavender, eau-de-cologne, and a few other such feminine restoratives, somewhat nearer Lady Moffat's hand, and then, inquiring if there were anything more she could do, took an impatient gesture as a reply in the negative, and left the room.

Doctor Dilton, whose eyes were now growing accustomed to the half light, and who was wondering any woman could exist in an atmosphere so heavy with drug and perfume, availed himself of the pause which ensued to gain some idea of her ladyship's personal appearance. It did not instantly dawn upon him who Lady Moffat really was. The idea that my lady dressed in richest silk, with every accessory of wealth about her, surrounded by every luxury the heart of woman could desire, was identical with the slight girl-wife, whose graceful curves were set off by

no costlier material than a cheap print, never entered his mind.

The years had come and the years had gone, and before him he saw not the figure which, standing under the Portuguese laurel, startled the gentleman who once walked the Romford-road at break of day, but a larger, more magnificent woman, upon whose shapely hand diamonds sparkled, whose stately throat was set off by frillings of the most delicate lace.

All at once, finding he made no sign, she impatiently raised her head, and, pushing back her hair with both hands, said irritably,

'I thought you were never coming. I sent for you hours ago;' and she looked up at him with the eyes he had never forgotten, unchanged, save that the shadows of years lay lurking in their wonderful depths.

It is not too much to say Doctor Dilton almost gasped. This thing—this awful thing—he felt could not be; and yet it seemed still more impossible earth held two women so strongly resembling each other as Thomas Palthorpe's faithless wife and the mistress of Sir John Moffat's splendid mansion.

In her face there gleamed no light of recognition. Doctor Dilton had worked hard and lived hard, and age had told upon him, as it always does on men whose toil, mental and physical, continues year in year out. While she had fared sumptuously, never known the lack of money, lain soft, slept soundly, troubled about nothing on the face of God's wide earth save her own comfort, her own ease, her own gratification—he had been out in all sorts of wild weather, called up at night, anxious now and then about wife and children, worried about difficult cases, tried by the multiplicity of awkward tempers he came in contact with.

He was changed out of recognition. Not so Lady Moffat. An older, handsomer, finer, more decided Mira Palthorpe, than she who looked enviously at the wives of the rich merchants who came to shop in Stratford Broadway, and whose marvellous beauty had seemed something superhuman when seen by the glinting moonbeams under the arching trees of Epping; but Mira Palthorpe still. O yes, he knew her! Without the shadow of doubt, he felt sure the woman before him was identical with

the negligent wife he had talked to so often and so plainly in the poor parlour, love had never transformed and glorified for her.

All these thoughts and more swept through Doctor Dilton's mind even while he answered,

'I am sorry I was out when your messenger arrived. I came here the moment I returned home.'

'Well, now you are here see what you can do for me. Make my heart stop beating, will you? What must I take to get rid of this hammering in my head? I feel as if I should like to go out and walk for miles and miles; but when I even try to cross the room my strength fails me.'

He took her hand in his, and felt it was dry and burning. In the olden days he had never retained it one second longer than he could help, but now he seemed in no hurry to relinquish his hold.

With calm deliberation he laid his fingers on her pulse, and counted its wild irritable throbbings, asking her some questions the while concerning her health in general. Then, quite leisurely, he proceeded to ascertain whether, medically, her frightful nervousness could be accounted for. From the first

he felt satisfied her ailment, however it might have been produced, was purely mental; but he was far too careful a doctor to take his own opinions for granted unless he could find them confirmed by facts. Heart sound; lungs not affected; liver to be depended on; digestion not at fault; nothing he could discover amiss in her splendid physical constitution.

And yet her pulse such as no woman in health ought to have. Doctor Dilton again touched the white soft wrist, and, with head a little bent, was considering the story he was listening to in silence, when, suddenly and swiftly, his own was seized, and his hand pushed aside with a strong firm grip.

Steadily he looked in Lady Moffat's face.

'What is it?' he asked. 'What is the matter?'

She did not answer; she only gazed at him with a sort of wondering incredulity, a frightened amazement. Then that expression died away; the old sullen darkness deepened in her eyes; she relaxed her grasp, and released his hand.

'I am going mad, I think,' she murmured; and turning her face once again from him, laid it wearily against the velvet of her chair.

'You have had a shock of some kind to-day,' he said.

'A horrible shock,' she answered, shuddering as she spoke.

'I am afraid this is a case in which medicine can do very little; but I will send you something that may do you good.'

'I am afraid there is nothing will do that really,' she replied.

'Well, we must try, at any rate,' he said, trying to speak cheerfully. 'I hope I shall find you better when I call to-morrow.'

'I don't think you will,' she moaned despondently.

There was no use prolonging a dialogue of this kind; so the doctor rose, and after taking his leave moved towards the door, his eyes, almost unwittingly, taking in every detail of the luxury and refinement surrounding a woman who had sinned as few of her sex ever do sin, who had dared that scarce any one would have possessed the courage and the folly to carry through to the end.

'Doctor!' The word fell very faintly upon his

ear, but as he heard he stopped, and retraced his steps.

She looked up at him; looked with a haggard hunted expression in her eyes that touched Doctor Dilton, in spite of his better judgment.

'There was something I wanted to say,' she remarked, toying with her fan, which she had not hitherto used, 'but I forget what it was now. I shall remember—to-morrow.'

He walked to the door again, had his hand even upon the handle, and then returned. She glanced askance at his homely figure, as he came close to her side; then, compelled by something in his face, grasped her chair with both hands, while she looked up at him with wild frightened eyes, from which fear had cast out for a moment the evil light of old.

'Pray do not be alarmed,' he began gently, more gently than he had ever spoken to her in the far-away days at Stratford. 'I only want to ease your mind of one source of anxiety. The question you wished to ask me a moment ago was, unless I am greatly mistaken, whether I remembered you. No —no—don't do that;' for she covered her fair sinful

face with trembling hands; 'your secret is quite safe with me. I should not be fit for my occupation if upon occasion I failed to be deaf, dumb, blind, to anything but the condition of a patient.'

She removed her hands from her face, and, stretching them out, caught his, crying wildly,

'Help me, help me!' But this was more than he had bargained for or meant to concede.

With but scant courtesy he released his fingers; and then, half ashamed of his impetuosity, stood silent, while she said mournfully,

'Ah, you always hated me!'

'I never liked you,' he answered, his sturdy honesty coming to his help in the moment of extremest need; 'but for that very reason you may trust me now. Were you Lady Moffat fifty times over, I should be sorry for you still.'

'I *am* Lady Moffat!' she cried. 'What do you mean by saying if I were?'

He shook his head slowly, sorrowfully.

'Never mind about that,' he said. 'Whatever you may be, whoever you are, makes no difference to me. If you think I can do you good I will come

again; if not, all you have to say is, "Stay away." Your identity with a certain lady in the days when I was younger is safe with me. Good-bye.' And quite freely he held out his hand in farewell.

Perhaps in that very fact she read danger.

'What do you mean,' she asked, 'by suggesting I am not Lady Moffat?'

'I suggested nothing,' he answered. 'I am quite willing to take you for what you profess to be. So long as I am asked to attend Lady Moffat, I come to see Lady Moffat. If you do not wish me to come again, I will stay away.'

'No; I would rather you came,' she said, after a moment's pause; 'though what evil wind blew you to Kensington, I cannot imagine.'

'I simply came here to keep my cousin's practice together, while he goes down to my place ill,' was the reply.

'Since we bought this house, I have never known a day's peace,' she remarked wearily; 'never —never. I wish Palace Gardens had been buried fathoms deep before we heard of it.'

'You played for high stakes.'

'And lost,' she replied—'and lost.'

'If I might venture a suggestion —' he hesitated.

'Venture, whatever it may be,' she said.

'I would tell Sir John everything that is on your mind.'

'Too late,' was the despairing answer; 'too late —too late!'

'Unless I hear from you to the contrary, I will see you again to-morrow,' said Doctor Dilton. 'I shall send you something directly that should prove of benefit.'

And so, without more formal leave-taking, he quitted the room, pausing just for a moment, as he closed the door behind him, to draw a long breath of wonder and relief.

As he so paused, he saw a gentleman walk along the corridor and down the staircase. It was Sir John Moffat; and instinctively Doctor Dilton slackened his pace, ere following in his wake. There were many reasons—hundreds they then seemed—why he should not at that moment meet the owner of Holyrood House.

'The cab is at the door, Sir John,' he heard the butler say, 'and I have put in the luggage.'

'Thank you,' said Sir John. And Doctor Dilton proceeding slowly down the grand flight—which at Holyrood House does not spring out of the main hall, but gives upon it—could see Sir John take his hat from Simonds, and suffer that functionary to assist him with his outer coat.

Not liking to stay, not caring to intrude, the doctor followed Sir John's footsteps leisurely across the hall. He saw him pass through the door, enter the cab; heard Simonds ask where the man was to drive, and say,

'Victoria—in time for the French mail.'

Then modestly he edged his own way out past Simonds, who stood on the steps looking into the night, and considering all the sins of all the masters he had ever served.

'What a lovely night for the time of year!' said Doctor Dilton, who had lived too long in the country to fall into the fatal mistake Londoners affect of 'keeping the lower orders at their distance.'

'Lovely, sir,' answered Simonds, moving a step

or two back. 'May I take the liberty of asking how her ladyship is now?' this tentatively.

'I hope I shall find her better to-morrow,' answered Doctor Dilton diplomatically. 'There is nothing serious the matter, however,' he went on, and most courteously he touched the brim of his hat in answer to Simonds' 'Good-night, sir;' proving thereby he was, as that functionary said to Mrs. Larrup, 'quite the gentleman.'

Ah, my friends, the day is coming, and a good day it will prove, when you will all have to be 'quite the gentleman,' as well to your inferiors as your equals. The 'gentlemen' of old were gentlemen once, gentlemen always; and the gentlemen of the future will be compelled to revert to their splendid example.

A plain, and in some respects a rough, man, Doctor Dilton was loyal, honest, stanch. Also, he was tender withal, and from the very bottom of his soul he pitied Sir John Moffat. As a matter of course, his first and best sympathies were with Mr. Palthorpe; but as he walked away from Holyrood House, and considered all that exposure and disgrace would mean to a man occupying so prominent

a position, his heart sank within him, and he thanked Heaven it was not his hand that should deal the blow.

He understood something of the matter now. Knew that, whatever sin might have preceded the marriage, Sir John had tried to act fairly by a woman he believed a widow.

'Whatever wrong there has been,' he considered, 'was her doing. Well, she will have to pay an awful penalty for it all ere long.'

When he reached his cousin's house, the servant said there was a lady waiting for him in the dining room, and entering that apartment he found Miss Aggles.

'I could not rest,' she began hurriedly, 'without coming round to tell you what happened to-day. I have seen Mira.'

He could not help starting; it seemed as if all the parts of the terrible puzzle were fitting themselves together with no assistance save that of some mysterious Fate.

'Where?' he asked. 'How did you chance to come across her?'

'She called at our place.'

'She did what!' exclaimed Doctor Dilton, as though doubting the evidence of his senses.

'Not knowing she was going to meet me, you may be sure of that,' answered Miss Aggles, with grim earnestness. 'She came with a Miss Banks to call on. I happened to be in the drawing-room, when she walked in as unconcerned and assured as possible, splendidly dressed, looking haughty and insolent, and magnificently handsome. O doctor, what a beautiful creature she is even now! And I can't tell, I am sure, how I knew her after all these years, but I did in a moment; and I was so amazed —so frightened indeed—I said, "Mira," just like that, before I could think what I was doing.'

'And what did she say?' inquired Doctor Dilton.

'Not a word—not a syllable; she seemed to shrink and get smaller before my eyes; she lifted her hands this way,' and Miss Aggles held her own out before her as if to ward off some tangible foe, 'and backed, *backed*, Doctor Dilton, out of the room.'

'God bless me!' exclaimed the doctor; for Miss

Aggles' account of the interview was graphic, and he could grasp all the horror such a meeting must have held for Thomas Palthorpe's faithless wife.

'And what happened then?' he asked at last. 'Did you follow her?'

'No, I did not, I felt too much stunned; but Miss Banks did. She is a lithe active little woman, though elderly; and she ran down the stairs and out of the house, saying she feared dear Lady Moffat was ill.'

'Yes; anything more?'

'She returned in a few minutes, to apologise, as she said, for herself and friend. Dear Lady Moffat, the sweetest and most sensitive creature on earth, had been quite overcome with the sudden shock. "She tells me you nursed her,"' went on Miss Aggles, quoting Miss Banks.

'And what did you answer?' asked Doctor Dilton, who was able to see the humour of the statement.

'It took me a little aback; but I said, "Well, yes, I certainly had nursed her."'

'What occurred next?'

'Nothing much, I think. Miss Banks of course

was inquisitive. She is not a nice person, I think; but she did not get any information out of me.'

There ensued a short silence; then Doctor Dilton asked,

'Have you told him?' No need to particularise whom he meant by name.

'Not yet. I am not sure that I shall. He came home thoroughly unnerved. He has found the—the —person—you know.'

'Yes, I know,' answered Doctor Dilton.

'And then what a horrible complication it makes, her being married; and to such a great gentleman, too! Who is Sir John Moffat?'

'Haven't a notion,' said Doctor Dilton.

'He is enormously rich, Miss Banks says,' went on Miss Aggles.

'She played her cards well, did she not?' remarked Doctor Dilton.

Miss Aggles shook her head mournfully.

'Such a tangle,' she said, 'such a tangle! And then there is Rachel, too. He tells me she is alive. Now, her father ought to claim her at any rate, ought he not?'

'He has waited a good many years,' observed Doctor Dilton dryly. 'I should imagine he could wait a few days longer.'

'And here is another trouble, too,' went on Miss Aggles. 'Mr. Lassils and Madge have to-day finally agreed not to marry.'

'Why not?' he asked. 'I understood Lassils, at all events, did not mean to give up hope for a long time yet.'

'He has found out she likes somebody else.'

'Who, in Heaven's name?'

'He says Mr. Palthorpe.'

'Good Lord!' ejaculated the doctor. 'You don't believe it, do you?'

'I am not sure,' said Miss Aggles dubiously. 'It never occurred to me till he mentioned it; but I am not sure now.'

'She has no idea he is married, I suppose?'

'It was not a matter we were likely to mention, I am sure,' continued poor Miss Aggles. 'What with one thing, and what with another, I feel as if I could not be in my right senses.'

CHAPTER VIII.

WAITING.

A MONTH passed quickly by, and still the world knew nothing of the true state of affairs at Holyrood House. From that night, when, without his dinner, and without the slightest warning or preparation, Sir John drove away from the door, he had never crossed its threshold. In the first instance he went to Paris; but Simonds knew he had returned to London, and was to be found at his place of business in the City. If there had been a quarrel between himself and Lady Moffat, no servant about the house was cognisant of the fact; indeed, no ground existed for supposing any disagreement had occurred, for on the morning of the day in question, they had parted upon apparently perfectly friendly terms, and when he returned in the evening he did not see her.

The doctor was with her ladyship when Sir John

passed hurriedly up the staircase; and he left the house, having, no doubt, Simonds and Winter decided, confided the cause of his sudden departure to Miss Rachel.

That it was all very odd the whole household agreed; but domestic opinion inclined to the belief that something had gone wrong about money.

A considerable number of large establishments were broken up about that period; the papers were full of frauds, failures, conspiracies, and vague rumours of further impending disasters; and, for his own part, Simonds could see no reason why his master should not 'go' as well as anybody else.

Very likely her ladyship had heard a hint about the matter when she was taken ill so suddenly; and, under any circumstances, there could be no doubt she and Sir John understood each other perfectly.

'He'll be found missing one fine morning, as Seaton was,' considered the butler, 'and she'll stop to save as much out of the wreck as she can.'

The whole atmosphere of the house was felt to be steeped in mystery. Lady Moffat, on pretence of

ill health, would see no visitors. Yet Winter reported to the kitchen detectives there was nothing the matter with her, save temper.

Directly after Sir John's departure, an old lady had called upon, and been closeted with, Lady Moffat for a couple of hours; and, in course of time, it became known to the servants this lady came from the house in Palace Gardens 'where the Australian people lived.'

Somehow, also, Mr. Simonds ascertained that an Australian gentleman had been at Sir John's office, and that he (Sir John) 'never seemed to be the same man since.'

'Depend upon it, there's losses,' said Mrs. Larrup oracularly; 'that's what it is—losses.'

'I am quite of your opinion, cook,' agreed Miss Winter, flitting airily about the lower regions, and remarking from time to time she never had lived previously among people who were so precious close as the Moffats.

'They never let fall a word; and if she' (in the easy confidence of private life Winter referred to her mistress in the simple manner stated) 'does get a

letter, she burns it away to white ash—she does, I assure you.'

'When folks as should be gentlefolks, and act according, begin to look after candle-ends—as a person may consider pounds of meat is no more nor candle-ends to them,' remarked Mrs. Larrup, with genuine belief in her tone—'it does not need any conjurer to tell what is coming. I have always said, and I always will say, that if them as is set in high places keep their position proper, their position will keep them; but when they begin a-poking and a-prying and a-questioning, and paying their own bills and disputing farthings, it looks bad, and it'll end bad; and, though I may not be here to see it, mark my words.'

'I can't say I ever did think much of Sir John as a master,' capped Mr. Simonds disparagingly. 'There was no presence about him. I am sure, when he had guests here, I have often felt almost ashamed to see him sitting so dull and silent.'

'Ah, if you had much to do with her, you'd only wish she would be silent,' said Winter. 'Of all the tempers I ever did come across—there, well, though

I say it myself, I feel as if I must have been a saint to put up with such continual scolding and grumbling and airs and graces.'

'I wonder what's become of old Banks all this time,' marvelled Simonds; 'she ought to be in the thick of whatever is going to happen.'

'Mrs. Hemans told me on Sunday she is trying to keep Mr. Gayford's soul and body together. He has been very bad indeed with bronchitis,' explained Mrs. Larrup.

'She is a spiteful cat; but I will say this much for her, she takes good care of him,' observed Miss Winter. 'There is nothing he wants money can buy, Niel told me some time ago.'

'Then I am very certain she finds her interest in keeping him alive,' Simonds declared; a statement which found so much favour that a murmur of approval passed from lip to lip.

'Miss Rachel goes over there most days,' said Winter. 'Her ladyship is very anxious to know how he goes on. I believe she sends Banks money.'

'Likely enough; that sort of busybody always can get money. Miss Edwina does not go, I'll be

bound. She has too much to do meeting young Lassils in the Park;' and then their heads all drew closer together, and gossip got very brisk indeed; and every one agreed it was a pity some one did not tell Sir John; not, indeed, that it would much signify, if he 'smashed,' whom his younger daughter took up with.

In those days, the servants at Holyrood House had very little to do; the social atmosphere was oppressive, and they had plenty of leisure time to consider the shortcomings of those whose bread they ate, and to speculate concerning Sir John's sudden and unaccountable absence from his home.

As for Lady Moffat herself, she passed the hours in a long fever of dread and apprehension.

Everything was found out now, though the world still remained in ignorance of her antecedents. Sir John knew all about the cruel deceit she had practised, had nothing more to learn as regarded her perfect knowledge of her husband's safety.

'When I remember all,' he wrote to her, not in anger, but in sorrow, 'the anguish you have seen me suffer, the travail of my soul over the man I believed

dead, I feel I cannot—as if I never could—forgive you. But for that you will not care; all you desire is money, position. The last, even if I wished, I could no longer give you; as regards the former, I shall settle upon you a moderate, but sufficient, income. Your husband, I understand, intends to sue for a divorce; and, as I intend to sell Holyrood House, it will be easier and better for you either to go abroad or retire to some quiet watering-place. I have not yet fully decided upon my future arrangements; but in any case the children will live with me.'

And he hinted that the sooner she could leave Holyrood House, and betake herself to the contemplative life indicated in his letter, the better he would be pleased.

But she could not give up everything in a moment at his bidding—wealth, rank, consideration—and sink into as total an obscurity as that from which he had raised her. To the world she was still Lady Moffat, to her children, to her servants; four people only knew her what she was; and she knew she could count on the silence of three of them.

The fourth—ah! she dreaded him. But if she could only defer the evil day a little longer, who knows what might happen? For his own sake Sir John would never make the matter public, never try to prove she was not legally his wife; whilst as regards the other, fifty things were possible; amongst them, that he might die.

She had no scheme in her mind about killing him; though violent, she was not made of the stuff out of which murderers are fashioned. And yet, given the opportunity, supposing a chance had presented itself of slipping that obnoxious first husband out of the world, it may be she would have helped him over the hardest part of his long journey with as little remorse or compunction as she had stolen Rachel from the true hearts that loved her.

Now it may indeed be said Rachel was her only hope. She thought it not impossible that, for the sake of his child, her husband might let the dead past lie; Sir John, she knew, could be moulded by the girl. The more she reflected, the more probable it seemed to her she might yet escape the full measure of the punishment she dreaded.

If she could still remain Lady Moffat, if the world could only be induced to believe she and Sir John were separated merely because of incompatibility of temper, if she could close Thomas Palthorpe's lips, why, then, although things might not be quite so well as they had been, still no one should hear her complain.

The more she thought about the matter, the more satisfied she felt Rachel was now her only rock of safety. If there were only some one in whom she could confide, some one with whom she could take counsel! Doctor Dilton? Yes, the very first opportunity she would talk to him about the matter. How did it happen she had not thought of him before—knowing all the circumstances also?

But Doctor Dilton nipped her confidences in the bud.

'You have not seen my elder daughter yet?' she said one day, fixing him with an anxious unsmiling gaze, which yet was meant to be gracious and winning, and which he felt covered more than her words conveyed.

'No,' he answered shortly; 'and I don't want to see her. To be quite frank—'

'You never were anything else, I think,' she interrupted.

'I have no desire or intention of being mixed up with this business. I was called in to see you as Lady Moffat, and Lady Moffat, from a medical point of view, you remain to me.'

'But Rachel—' she began.

'Whatever you have got to say about her could be best said to her father, I should think,' he replied brusquely. 'I know pretty well what is in your mind, but it is of no use trying to take me into your confidence. I will have no say in the matter.'

Foiled here, Lady Moffat betook herself to her daughter, poor lonely Rachel, who was now, indeed, as desolate a maiden as could have been found in the length and breadth of London. She heard from Sir John regularly; she had prayed that she might go and see him at the office, but he would not hear of it.

'Some day,' he wrote, 'I will explain everything, but when that day arrives I shall lose you.'

'NEVER,' she wrote back. 'You will always be

to me my own dear father, as I shall be to you your own loving child.'

What a stab was there! what a cruel game of cross-purposes it all seemed! what weary days those were! what a time of terrible suspense, of cruel uncertainty!

'Rachel,'—it was Lady Moffat who spoke, standing in her daughter's room, and looking with wistful eyes that yet saw nothing of the landscape over the yews in Kensington that had grown so sadly familiar to her daughter's sight,—'if I ask you to do something for me, I wonder whether you would refuse my request?'

'You wonder, mamma!' repeated the girl, surprised. 'Surely you know there is nothing in the world you could ask me I would not do.'

'Do you mean that, Rachel? for I have not been a good mother to you; I have never cared for you; I never loved you.'

'I know that,' answered the tender heart, with a little sob of pain; 'but it makes no difference. I would do anything I could, as though you loved me as much as you loved Edwina and the boys.'

Lady Moffat stopped short. She was walking with a slow swinging movement, not habitual to her, up and down the room. There was a rest in Rachel's presence she did not feel elsewhere; a repose about her which, at the moment, seemed grateful to the stormy violent nature which had come to grief at last on a cruel iron-bound coast.

'I am not certain,' she answered, 'I ever loved Edwina or the boys. I don't think, Rachel, it is in me to love anything.'

In a moment the girl was beside her mother, had drawn her to a seat, and lay weeping on her breast.

'What can I do for you?' she asked after a little time. 'Only tell me—only try me. Do you want me to go to papa? Yes, whether he is angry or not—O, he would not be long angry with me—I will go. What do you wish me to say? You will let me try to help you, won't you?'

Yes, Lady Moffat had no argument to urge against so laudable a desire. But she could not tell her yet, she said—not just yet; and so for a time they talked together, while the twilight deepened

and the shadows crept on, and the figures of both became indistinct in the gathering darkness; and Winter wondered what on earth her ladyship was doing in Miss Rachel's room.

'What I want you to do for me one day—some day very soon, perhaps,' said the elder woman at last deliberately, and yet as if the words were wrung from her, 'is to go to your father—to stand between me and your father. When I ask you, will you?'

'Of course, dear mamma,' the girl answered, all unconscious of her mother's meaning; 'how could you think otherwise?'

That evening Simonds remarked at dinner her ladyship appeared in excellent spirits.

'I daresay she has good news from Sir John, and that he may pull through yet,' considered the butler. 'I hear he has gone to France again. Getting help, perhaps, from some of those foreign bankers.'

CHAPTER IX.

FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE.

'PUT down your work, aunt, and give me all your attention; I want to speak to you seriously;' and Mr. Palthorpe laid aside his book, and, crossing his arms upon the table near which he sat, answered, with a grave wistful smile, Miss Aggles' look of apprehension.

'All speaking has been serious lately,' she said, folding up her knitting and sticking the needles carefully in it, as though her very soul were concentrated in the operation.

'Yes; but I have now made up my mind,' he answered. 'I have been a long time about it, certainly; still—'

'It was right for you to weigh the matter fully,' she replied firmly, though her voice trembled a little at first. 'I, for one, can see no reason why you

should hesitate to free yourself at last from a trouble which has burdened all the best years of your life.'

He did not say anything for a minute; he only glanced round the pleasant cosy-looking room with an expression of quiet content.

Save for the servants, he and Miss Aggles were alone in the house. General Graham and his daughter had been gone for some time to stay with friends in the country; and it was tacitly understood amongst those who, till so recently, deemed they were always to make their pleasant home together, that when Mr. Palthorpe left Palace Gardens for good, as he meant to do ere long, the Grahams would return to the house and take up their abode in London.

Very little was said on the subject between General Graham and his friend, but that little chanced to be so much to the purpose that the former clearly understood present arrangements could not continue.

Miss Aggles and Mr. Palthorpe were therefore alone, as they had often been before, in poverty and

in prosperity, during the years which now seemed so many and so distant.

'You have never asked me where I spent the last few days,' he remarked, after a pause which seemed longer than was actually the case.

'No,' she answered; 'not—not with the Grahams?'

'I should be an even poorer fellow than I am had I done that,' he replied. 'I went to Ravelsmede.'

'To Ravelsmede! What in the wide world induced you to go there?'

'I wanted to see the old place. The Hall is to be sold.'

'Sold!' repeated Miss Aggles. 'How does that happen?'

'I do not know; but there the boards were up, and I asked leave to view the house and went through the familiar rooms. How small they looked! but O, how inexpressibly dear they seemed! I wandered among the plantations, and climbed the hill from which I used to watch the ships passing down the Channel; and then I walked slowly, not with the eager haste of former days,' he added, with

a sad smile, 'down the path which led to the old orchard, where I used to see her with the sunlight glancing on her lovely face, that I thought once was the most beautiful in all the land.'

'It is beautiful still,' said Miss Aggles; but he put the remark aside with a gesture which proved that between the past and the present there was, for him, a gulf fixed as broad and deep as that described in the parable as stretching, in the next world, between the rich man and the poor.

'If the joy and the sorrow, the harvest of love I thought I was reaping, the worldly loss I actually sustained, were matters only of yesterday instead of twenty and odd long years, they could not have seemed more present with me than was the case. I thought the whole affair over, considered my own part in it and hers, and I have determined,' he drew a quick gasping breath ere he added, 'to let her and her sin both rest; I shall not sue for a divorce.'

'Not sue for a divorce! Keep yourself tied to a woman who has been more cruelly false to you than woman ever was before!'

'Even so,' he answered quietly. 'I have made

up my mind; I feel no uncertainty on the subject now. I took her for better or worse; out of my own headstrong will I married her; and though it all turned out worse, I am not going to shrink from my part of the punishment. Look you,' he went on, 'the last time I saw the Hall the trees were green about it and the flowers in bloom, and the blue sky overhead and the bees humming amongst the ivy; now driving clouds made both sea and land look bleak and cold and gray. There was not a flower to be seen; the trees were bare, the birds silent; down in your old orchard not a bud, not a ruddy apple or a golden plum; no waving corn, no grass knee-deep in the meadows; but still it was the same place, and she—God help us both!—is the same woman she was.'

There ensued a long silence. Then said Miss Aggles, 'You ought to think most seriously about all this. The day may come—'

'No,' he answered, 'the day may not come; the day shall not come. What I say I have decided, and I now know a rest and a peace I never experienced since last I returned to England. If I

were to sue for a divorce now I know very well *why* I should strive for it, and that I should never afterwards experience one easy moment. Nothing I could do would help her; even if Sir John now married her, that could not undo the scandal caused by a public trial. And then there is Rachel to consider also.'

'Yes; what are you going to do about her?'

'I must have my daughter,' was the answer. 'I will tell you all my plans, though I can scarcely say yet how I mean to carry them out. To-morrow I will see Dilton, and get him to settle matters with Sir John; I could not do that myself—I could not; and there is no need to take the lawyers into our confidence. I mean to buy the Hall. O, I forgot to mention, it turns out by some curious twist of fortune that old Nelfield's eighty thousand reverts to me. His direct heirs are dead, and my mother, it seems, if she had survived would now have been the nearest of kin. I shall make a handsome settlement on Madge, and see what can be done for Lassils; but I do not intend to give up the whole amount. And now I want you to do something

for me. Before I see Dilton to-morrow I wish to put the matter beyond the power of recall. I want you to go and tell *her* so far as I am concerned she need fear no exposure. She may rely upon my promise. For his own sake and his children's Sir John will keep matters quiet. There will be a separation, but the world need not know why they separated. I have thought it all over; the greatest difficulty I see is how we are ever to explain things to Rachel.'

'And we know nothing about how she has grown up,' said Miss Aggles helplessly. 'People say she is a sweet nice girl; but it is hard to tell. I have so wished to see her, and never yet succeeded, though I often pass the house half a dozen times a day.'

'I have seen her often,' he answered, with a dreamy look of satisfaction in the eyes which were so like her own.

'How? when?' asked Miss Aggles eagerly.

'Many places,' he replied; 'followed her as she went on her little errands of charity; walked behind her and her sister in Kensington; seen her on the

terrace behind Holyrood House; and watched her wandering thoughtfully round the paths in Sir John's garden. Many and many a time I have stood behind the tree growing close beside the fence dividing Kensington from Palace Gardens, and seen her looking out of the window of her own room, with a sad troubled look on her young face. O, yes! I know my daughter well; I wish she had half or quarter as much acquaintance with me.'

Loyal, faithful, unselfish, time had not changed his nature, years had wrought no difference in his reluctance to give pain—in his ability to suffer silently.

Beyond all other perplexity this seemed greatest, how to hint to his child a word of her mother's shame. If he could have left that as it was, he would even have given up his daughter. But there is a point beyond which a man cannot go; and with him this point seemed reached when he thought of Rachel living on with the woman who had spoiled his whole existence—believing herself the daughter of the man whose blood could not have washed out the wrong committed.

'I will go if you wish,' said Miss Aggles, after a moment's pause, reverting to their previous subject of conversation; 'but I certainly do think you ought not to decide such an important question in a hurry.'

'I have not decided it in a hurry,' he answered. 'Day and night it has never been absent from my mind for months past. I have tossed on seas of doubt, and temptation, and passion, and revenge; but I know now what I ought to do, and I shall not draw back. When will you see her—to-night?'

'Not to-night,' said Miss Aggles, shrinking a little from the proposal.

'Then write to her,' he persisted; 'write that you will call to-morrow morning early. Say also you can take her good news; otherwise she may, perhaps, refuse to see you.'

'But why,' asked Miss Aggles, 'should I write at all?'

'Because,' he answered, 'I want to feel before I sleep, one step is taken on a road I know to be right.'

Reluctantly, because she believed in this last concession to his worthless wife Thomas Palthorpe

was putting away all hope he might ever possess of a happy home, of domestic felicity, in the years to come; and yet thankfully, because her own heart still yearned over the woman she had taken to her arms when her own mother forsook her—and she would have spared her open shame and disgraceful exposure at any cost to herself—Miss Aggles drew writing materials towards her and finished a note, which she handed across to her companion.

'Thank you,' he said, folding it up; 'I will see it is sent immediately.'

'O,' she entreated, 'just think over the matter for another hour—only one hour.'

'Not one minute!' he answered firmly, and, leaving the room, despatched a messenger to Holyrood House.

Ere long a verbal reply was returned:

'Her ladyship was much obliged, and would be glad to see Miss Aggles at the hour mentioned.'

As the door closed behind the servant who delivered this message Mr. Palthorpe and Miss Aggles looked at each other and smiled, in spite almost of their own inclination.

'Her ladyship, indeed!' said Miss Aggles indignantly. '*Her* ladyship!'

But Mr. Palthorpe made no remark, only sat for a little time gazing intently at the fire.

Not, perhaps, with the best will in the world, but still with as good a grace as she could assume, Miss Aggles, after breakfast next morning, tied the strings of her old-fashioned bonnet—which she called her 'old woman's bonnet'—in an elaborate bow under the chin, and betook herself to Holyrood House.

Arrived there, she was asked into the library, while Simonds went in search of Winter, who presently appeared to say,

'Her ladyship had not yet rung her bell, and would Miss Aggles be kind enough to wait for a little while?'

'Yes,' Miss Aggles said, 'she would wait. Was Lady Moffat likely to ring soon?'

Winter could not tell; her ladyship was most uncertain, and never liked to be disturbed. Indeed, her (Winter's) directions were most positive not to disturb her on any pretext whatever. For many months her ladyship had been sleeping very badly,

and the doctors laid great stress upon her getting sleep, if possible.

While Winter was delivering herself of these various statements Edwina came in.

'You are the lady mamma was expecting to call this morning, I suppose?' she said. 'I am so sorry she is not up. Won't you have a cup of tea or coffee?'

No; Miss Aggles had breakfasted, but expressed a desire to know at what hour Lady Moffat's awaking might generally be looked for.

Edwina did not know. Sometimes she rose at six, and sometimes not till one.

'If you think it in the slightest degree likely she won't get up until one to-day, I am sure I shall not stop,' observed Miss Aggles, rising. 'I had an appointment with her, and I think she ought to have kept it.'

There was that in the visitor's manner which, taken in connection with her mother's manifest pleasure on the arrival of Miss Aggles' note the previous evening, impressed Edwina considerably.

She turned to the maid.

'Do you think we might venture for once?' she asked dubiously.

'O dear, no, miss,' answered Winter; 'I would not dare to do such a thing. I did once at Scarborough, if you remember, and her ladyship was very angry with me, very angry indeed.'

'Well, I'll risk that,' said Edwina determinedly. 'If you kindly wait a few minutes longer,' she added, speaking to Miss Aggles, 'I will tell mamma you are here;' and she left the room, followed by Winter, who whispered as they were crossing the hall,

'I would not do it, Miss Edwina, I would not, indeed. The lady lives close by here, and we could easily send round; I could even run up myself when your mamma rings.'

'Nonsense, Winter,' retorted Edwina; 'mamma is ever so much better now, and I daresay she would be vexed if we let this lady go. She had an appointment with her, I know.'

'I am aware, miss, it is not my place to speak, and if you please to take the responsibility—'

'Of course I please to take the responsibility,' answered the girl scornfully; 'did I not say so?'

And waiting for no further remonstrance she made her way up-stairs, and knocked softly at her mother's door. Winter, following her to the first landing, discreetly retired to the room where she generally occupied herself with needlework. There was a dead silence throughout the house; for a few minutes not a sound could be heard; then suddenly there rang out, in a tone of frightened agonised entreaty, the word 'Rachel!'

CHAPTER X.

DEAD.

'RACHEL!'

It was but one word, yet it rent the stillness of the silent house as a flash of lightning cleaves the darkness of night.

There was not a living creature within the walls but heard that cry.

'Lord bless and save us, what's that?' said Mrs. Larrup in the kitchen.

Simonds, meditating in his pantry concerning the shortcomings of all gentry, ran up, actually ran up, into the hall, wondering what had happened. Maids left off making beds, Winter threw down her mending, Miss Aggles opened the door of the library, Rachel ran down the stairs from her room like a lapwing, to find her sister at the bottom of the flight.

'Wina,' she asked, 'what is the matter?'

'Mamma!' gasped the girl hoarsely, 'mamma!'

The door stood open, and Rachel passed in. She just looked at the bed, looked at the quiet figure lying there, and then, with an exceeding bitter cry, fell on her knees beside all that remained of the mother who had never loved her.

By this time the whole household was either gathered in the room or assembled on the landing. Some of the women screamed, others uttered exclamations. The only person who retained his presence of mind was Mr. Simonds.

'Don't stand there with your mouth wide open,' he said severely to the page-boy, 'but run for the doctor. Be off, now!'

The lad needed no second bidding; he sped down the front staircase like an arrow, and was rushing across the hall, when he encountered a severe-looking elderly lady, who asked,

'What has happened?'

'Her ladyship,' answered the boy; 'they say she is dead in her bed.'

Dead! For a moment hall and garden and staircase seemed to reel before her sight; then Miss

Aggles walked straight up to the next floor, and entered the chamber filled with wondering and frightened women.

No one took any notice of her, no one seemed to think her appearance an intrusion. If the greatest stranger passing along the road had walked in at that moment, not even Mr. Simonds could sufficiently have recollected himself to bar his progress.

Edwina was lying on a sofa, face downwards, sobbing hysterically. Rachel was kneeling beside the bed, holding one of the cold hands that would never feel warmth more. The girl seemed stunned.

'Come away, dear,' said Miss Aggles, raising her almost by force. 'Come with me;' and led her unresisting out of the room, and through the first open door they came to.

'You are Rachel?' went on Miss Aggles gently.

'Yes, I am Rachel;' and then she began to cry —cry as if her very heart would break.

The old lady gathered her in her arms. She laid the young head on her bosom, and stroked her hair, and tried to soothe her grief.

'Poor child,' she said, 'poor child; don't try to

stop your grief; lie there, and let it have its way. Your first tears were shed on my breast. Many and many a night I have rocked you to sleep. You don't remember me, but—'

Rachel lifted her tear-stained face.

'No; I don't remember you,' she answered. 'Have I ever seen you before?'

'For the first four years of your life, I was going to say, you saw nobody else,' was the reply. 'I nursed you when you were a baby; my hands kept you from falling when first you tried to walk; you were my own very child; after me everywhere, with little tireless pattering feet; and then you were taken away, and I lost you. Lay your head down again, and cry; there, dear, see, I am crying too.'

'I must go to Edwina,' said the girl, who apparently heard little or nothing of Miss Aggles' speech; 'she will want me.'

'Stay here; I will fetch her;' and Miss Aggles, disappearing softly, shortly after returned with Edwina, her face sunken with weeping and distorted by grief.

'O Rachel, Rachel!' she cried; and, clasped in

each other's arms, the sisters' tears burst forth afresh.

'They will be better alone together,' murmured Miss Aggles; 'they don't know me;' and she passed out of the room and closed the door behind her.

She went back again to the chamber where the woman, who had so rarely been still in life, now lay so strangely quiet amongst the stir and buzz of excitement around her.

'The doctor has been sent for, I think,' said Miss Aggles, standing on the threshold and speaking to Simonds.

Mr. Simonds, with whom had originated this idea, intimated that such indeed was the fact.

'Don't you think, then, that some of these women had better go down-stairs again?' asked Miss Aggles.

It was a speech calculated to hurt his spirits; but Mr. Simonds felt nothing in Holyrood House had of 'late been very much worth taking notice of;' so he merely motioned to the cook, who, after a few whispered words, in her turn beckoned to the housemaids, and then they all proceeded to the basement,

where spirits were shortly produced, and each one incited the other to drink, 'if it was only a teaspoonful, to try and get over the shock.' They stood in a group and talked about the matter. They rang the changes upon the 'turn it had given them.' Singly they had to tell how they heard Miss Edwina's scream, and the particular way the sound affected them; also the point of view from which they first caught sight of 'her ladyship.'

Mrs. Larrup declared a baby could not look more peaceful and beautiful.

The upper-housemaid differed from this opinion, and said it was the most terrible sight she ever saw.

The kitchen-maid thought the poor dear lady was like nothing so much as a 'mask of stone;' while the under-housemaid struck horror into the hearts of her hearers by wondering whether there would be an inquest.

Mr. Simonds was disgusted.

'I am astonished at you,' he said indignantly; 'to talk of such things as inquests in respectable houses! I wonder what Sir John would think if he

knew the word had even been so much as mentioned under his roof.'

'I am ashamed of you, Marianne,' said her senior both in age and rank.

'And I'm sure you have given me quite another turn,' exclaimed the cook. 'Yes, Mr. Simonds; please just the least drop more; that gal has shook me all over with her inquests.'

'Well, one can only talk about what a person knows,' retorted Marianne. 'There was my own cousin fell off a scaffold and broke his neck; and they had an inquest on him, though it was plain enough what he died of.'

'That was different, quite different,' remarked Mr. Simonds loftily.

'I don't see it,' said Marianne defiantly.

'Well, let's have an end of this, at any rate,' entreated Mr. Simonds; 'we don't want none of your inquests here.'

'No; and we won't have none of them,' added the cook.

'It's such a low way of talking,' remarked the upper-housemaid, with her nose well in the air.

'For my part, I couldn't stop in a house where there was inquests and suchlike,' chimed in the kitchen-maid. 'My aunt, who goes out a-nursing, told me—'

'There, that will do,' interrupted Mr. Simonds, who knew from experience the reminiscences of the aunt in question were of a nature, as he put it, 'to destroy the appetite.' 'If you can't find anything more suitable to say, you had better hold your tongue. A hard thing, indeed, if a lady of title can't die in her bed without having such comparisons institooted;' and in high dudgeon Mr. Simonds betook himself to his pantry, all the more angry because, in his inmost heart, he thought there might be some reason in Marianne's remark.

'It is bad enough as it is,' he considered; 'but an inquest! I can't well imagine what Sir John would feel about that.'

Meantime, up-stairs, Miss Aggles, seated near the bed, waited patiently for the coming of the doctor.

Winter, who alone remained in the room, went through all the pantomime she considered only

decent and regular, but which Miss Aggles so improperly omitted.

She took sips of water; she breathed deep sighs she averted her head from the quiet figure lying so motionless; she sobbed in a demonstrative, though subdued, manner; she swallowed with difficulty, having apparently to contend with a great ball in her throat; she fidgeted from place to place, and at length attracted Miss Aggles' attention.

'Are you ill?' asked that lady, in the low tone which already pervaded the whole house.

'It's my 'art, ma'am. I have such a weak 'art; and the least thing gives me such palpitations. O, to think of my lady—'

'If you would rather not remain here, I will stay with her till the doctor comes; perhaps you had better go.'

'And leave you, ma'am?' said Winter reproachfully; 'I couldn't think of doing that.'

'You need not mind me,' said Miss Aggles; 'you had better go.'

But Winter would not go.

'My lady's rings and brooches were lying all

about,' she explained afterwards, 'and of course it was my place to stay.'

Miss Aggles turned her chair a little so as to screen her face from the maid, and sat looking on the dead. It seemed to her like a dream, save that the horror which lives in dreams was absent.

She felt almost as though she must shortly waken; as though the room, the place, the bed, its still occupant, were all mere parts and parcels of a night vision a moment might dispel.

She knew she was not shocked, or sorry, or touched. She could not forget. If she had found her niece in a mean garret, her face worn, her surroundings sordid, the fount of pity might have been unsealed, and refreshing waters rushed through her soul; but, as it was, everything in the room, every article on which her eye rested, reminded her how sordid had been her sin—the price she had counted upon receiving for ruining two lives.

In death her brow was not more marble than her heart had been in life; her cheek had not lost its roundness; grief had not mingled gray with her dark hair; for twenty-one years and more she had

led a life of sin; and remorse had not stamped a wrinkle on her face, had not marred the beauty of her features.

For others the pain and the trouble, for her the ease and the joy; for them struggle and misery, for her victory and happiness. She had lain soft; she had eaten of the best; she had been clad in fine raiment; she had walked delicately; the world had been made soft for her; she had never loved any one; never suffered a loss from any one; she was selfish to the inmost core, and—

'Miss Aggles, you here?' It was Doctor Dilton who spoke; he had come so softly into the room that she did not hear his approach.

The spinster got up, and, still with that numbed sensation of unreality on her face, gave him her hand.

He looked at the quiet figure.

'Dead,' he said softly, as though any word might waken her from the sleep into which she had fallen; and he laid his hand upon her forehead, and then upon her heart.

'Quite dead.'

Miss Aggles did not answer him. She stood,

her fingers clutching the back of her chair, a spasm seeming to contract her throat.

'What do you know about it?' he asked.

'Nothing,' she struggled to reply. 'I came to see her this morning by appointment; the younger daughter said she would tell her I had come—and—she—found her as you see.'

'Was your mistress complaining last night?' said the doctor, turning to the maid.

'No, sir; on the contrary; her ladyship,' with a marked emphasis on the word, 'observed she did not know when she felt so well.'

'Humph!' commented the doctor.

Between the bed and the fireplace stood a small table. He walked round to it and lifted a little bottle, looked at the label, held the vial up to the light, took out the cork, and smelt the contents.

'Sleeping drops,' exclaimed Winter, seeing the doctor was looking at her. 'Her ladyship latterly took them often.'

'Last night?' he inquired.

'No, sir; not last night. She said, "I feel sure I shall rest without them."'

'And so she did not take any?'

'No, sir; but her ladyship said, "You can leave the bottle within reach, Winter, though I don't expect I shall require to take any."'

'Just so; and how much was there in the bottle, do you suppose?'

'It was nearly full, sir.'

'Look at it now.'

Winter gave a little cry. 'Why, her ladyship has taken nearly all there was!'

'Nothing can be more dangerous than sedatives in the hands of a person who either sleeps badly, or fancies she does,' said the doctor, while examining a glass which likewise stood on the table. Then he turned his attention to a carafe of water close beside.

'It is plain enough, I think,' he said; 'plain enough. She has been gone for hours.'

He took a few steps with head bent, evidently considering deeply; then he asked Miss Aggles,

'Who was it, did you say, saw her first?'

'The younger daughter.'

'I should like to speak to her for a minute. Is she in a state to be spoken to?'

'Will you ask whether Doctor Dilton can see Miss Moffat?' said Miss Aggles to the maid.

'It was Miss Edwina, not Miss Moffat, ma'am,' corrected Winter.

Miss Aggles winced. 'I had forgotten,' she answered. 'Please make the inquiry.'

Having employed her leisure in putting away the jewelry, and that burden being off her mind, Winter proceeded to deliver the message.

She had scarcely got out of earshot before Miss Aggles began,

'Surely you do not imagine—'

'Not for a moment,' he interrupted, reading her thoughts before she could give verbal utterance to them. 'The last person in the world to do such a thing.'

'So I should have said; but still—'

'And, besides, there was no reason for it—*now*. Everything was known; no worse could come. She had no further revelation to fear. It was a pure accident, I am certain. She owes her death to her own impatience.'

Miss Aggles did not answer. She only turned

her eyes to the dead woman, and thought of the evening she had seen her pacing up and down beside the river, ceaselessly, like the Restless Cavey. She was quiet enough now. Lord! to think a few drops of anything could make her so still, could so swiftly cut the knot of difficulty, and solve for evermore so swiftly the last earthly mystery with which she could be connected!

'There must be an inquest,' went on Doctor Dilton abruptly.

'O, no! O, no!' cried Miss Aggles, putting out her hands as if to ward off a blow.

'It cannot be avoided,' he answered. 'She had no disease. There was no reason, so far as I know, why she might not have lived for fifty years. No; I could not give a certificate; you had better leave it to me. Sir John must be telegraphed for at once. Now, like a good dear soul, don't you give way,' he added, walking up to Miss Aggles, and laying both his hands on her shoulders; for she had at last broken down, thoroughly and completely; she had covered her face with her hands, her gray head was bowed in sorrow, her honest face was convulsed in

shame; all her woman's delicacy, all her instinctive modesty, all her simple dignity seemed humbled in a moment in the dust.

The idea of the beauty, of which she had been so proud, being looked on in death by strange men, the life which had been but one long course of selfish wickedness and sinful deceit exposed to view, shook her very soul.'

'O doctor!' she cried pitifully, 'I loved her—I loved her—I loved her once! For many a long night she lay next my heart. For many a long day after her mother deserted her I nursed and tended and cared for her. If she had been my one very own, I do not think she could have seemed nearer to me than she did; and now—and now—'

He let her grief have its way. He did not try to stem the torrent till its first violence was exhausted; then he said, in a low voice full of pity,

'This death is hard for you, but is it harder than her life? Think of all the worse which might have happened had her husband been a different man, and thank God—'

'I do—I have; only—'

'He had not left me five minutes when I was summoned there,' went on the doctor. 'We talked the matter over exhaustively; and I tried every argument I could think of to induce him, at least, to delay a decision which seemed to me calculated to embarrass and shadow the whole of his future life. All in vain. I am glad to remember now it was all in vain; that he went away steadfastly purposed to sacrifice himself, and to spare the woman who had forsaken him, as he would have cherished her had she been true.'

'Poor fellow, poor fellow!' sobbed Miss Aggles.

'Rich fellow I account him,' answered Doctor Dilton. 'Richer than if he owned the wealth of Rothschild, and lacked his own nature. But,' he proceeded, 'there are many things to see to, and at once. You must remain here. I shall tell the butler so. Do you suppose any one in the house knows where Sir John is to be found?'

'We might ask—Rachel,' answered Miss Aggles, drying her eyes, and striving to compose herself now she found actual work at hand to do.

'I wish you would ask her, then. I am going down-stairs. I want to speak to the butler and lady's-maid;' and he hastened out of the room without casting a glance behind. Left alone, Miss Aggles threw herself down beside the bed, and prayed as she had, perhaps, never prayed before during the whole course of her honest honourable life.

'O my dear,' she whispered at length, kissing the clay-cold cheek, 'may God have mercy upon you! From the time you were a selfish beautiful child, I do not think you ever understood half the evil you were doing; but *He* will know, *He* knows.'

She went with a firm step into the rectangular hall, out of which, at Holyrood House, all the best bedchambers open, and immediately encountered Winter, who, addressing her with great respect, said, would she be pleased to walk up into Miss Moffat's room.

Already Doctor Dilton had put matters straight for her. Though the disorganised household resented the advent of any strange mistress, the members composing it felt it might be wise to bow to circumstances, and, at all events, remain neutral

till they found what changes were likely to be inaugurated on Sir John's return.

So far as they could judge on such slight acquaintance, Miss Aggles was not a person who would interfere with their privileges, and turn everything in the house upside down.

After she had been with Rachel for a few minutes, she came down-stairs and spoke some words to Doctor Dilton; then she shut herself up in the library, and remained so quiet, Mr. Simonds, to use his own words, 'grew quite uneasy about her,' and 'made so bold,' after a couple of hours, as to go in and ask what she would like to have for luncheon.

It is quite unnecessary, perhaps, to say the servants had, in the interim, dined heartily, and partaken of wine with a good deal of feeling.

Mrs. Larrup remarked, after a sigh of repletion, 'We are here to-day and there to-morrow.' Miss Winter, who, though hard and acid-looking, professed a fondness for poetry, and was even supposed to be given to coquetting with the Muses herself, murmured something concerning 'flowers of the field,' while combating her regret with sherry, which

the company generally drank out of tumblers, 'not being,' as the upper-housemaid said, 'fashionable folks, thank Heaven, or even rich.'

Which was the point where Sir John's servants drew the line in Holyrood House; it is the point where more servants than are supposed draw the line.

They believed Sir John was rich, but they knew he was not fashionable; and one of them said she always felt her ladyship was very little better than themselves.

'Speak for yourself, please,' entreated Miss Winter, who, having partaken of a considerable amount of wine, felt herself a person of very great consequence indeed.

'We all know, I suppose, who our fathers were; at any rate I know who mine was. He kept a livery-stable at the back of the Edgware-road, and little thought his daughter would ever have to eat the bread of servitude. But it would puzzle any of you to say who my lady's father was, or whether she ever had one.'

'Come, come,' said Mr. Simonds, 'let's have no

more of this;' and to emphasise that he, for one, did not approve of such talk, he poured the wine which remained into his own tumbler, and saying he thought the strange lady must want something, hurried up-stairs, walked across the hall, and opened the library-door.

Miss Aggles was sitting at the table where Sir John had sat, with a Bible spread open before her, poring over the text she could hardly see, so dim were her eyes with tears.

'I could not eat anything, thank you,' she said mildly, in answer to Mr. Simonds' inquiry; 'and I do not take wine. Presently, if not inconvenient, I should like a cup of tea.'

During the course of the afternoon, Doctor Dilton returned to tell her he had made every arrangement it was possible to make before the return of Sir John.

While he stayed talking, and just as the dusk of evening was settling down over the great lonely room Lady Moffat could never survey with satisfaction, or pace restlessly again, Simonds entered to say Mr. Lassils was in the boudoir; for 'though he, Simonds, had told him of the misfortune, about her

ladyship, indeed, he earnestly requested permission to speak to Miss Aggles for a moment.'

'Will you go to him, or shall I see what he wants?' asked Doctor Dilton, looking at the card, and twisting it about in his fingers.

'No, thank you, I will go,' she answered; and rising, she proceeded, after adjusting her orderly curls, and shaking out the folds of her dress a little, to the room her niece could never find pride nor pleasure in more.

Under the gaslights, which Mr. Simonds had, in recognition of the deep distress in which the household was supposed to be plunged, turned down as low as possible, stood Mr. Lassils, hat in hand, his thoughts occupied about the first occasion when he entered the house, not a year previously.

'I beg your pardon for intruding,' he said, starting a little as Miss Aggles, coming quietly forward, addressed him. 'I am sure I am awfully sorry to hear about what has happened and all that, and I should not have come in, only I wanted to give you one hint. You know best, of course, but if I were in your place, *I would square Miss Banks.*'

'I scarcely understand,' said Miss Aggles, bewildered.

'Doctor Dilton is here, is he not? he will know what I mean. Don't neglect the warning. Square Miss Banks. She can make matters very unpleasant if she likes.'

CHAPTER XI.

'THERE IS MONEY TO BE MADE.'

By the time Sir John Moffat reached home, which he did on the evening of the next day, the inquest was over, the undertaker's men were in charge, paragraphs had appeared in the daily papers, headed, 'Lamentable Occurrence,' 'Sad Accident from the Use of Chloral,' 'Terrible Tragedy,' and suchlike.

Holyrood House had all day been besieged by persons who came to make inquiries and express their sympathy. There were as many cards on the marble slab as there had been when Lady Moffat first came to view the desirable residence. People shook their heads gravely about the matter. There was quite a hum of curiosity and confusion. All Kensington, as though possessed of one mind, busied itself about the Moffats: wondered, pitied, gossiped.

There seemed but a single exception, and that,

under most circumstances, might have been accounted remarkable. It was not so, however, as affairs stood in the narrow house out of which Miss Banks had made much capital. She was not flitting about the parish, emptying her little basket of news for the benefit of this dear friend and that delightful acquaintance, for a very sufficient reason—she had her dead too, and was mourning most sincerely. 'The dreadful object,' 'the frightful affliction,' her 'cross,' her 'trial,' her 'burden so nobly borne,' was gone where he could not be of use to her in any way for evermore. He had departed, and his income had departed also; and what was worse than both, at the same moment an insurance office, in which Miss Banks had with the savings of years purchased an annuity, collapsed also. Miss Banks was not a religious woman, or given to much biblical reference, whether verbal or otherwise. Nevertheless, as she sat gloomily in her little parlour pondering upon what had occurred, she did think about Job, and how first one messenger and then another rushed in the bearer of evil tidings.

Only one ray of comfort had pierced the darkness

of her future, and that came from an unexpected source. As she remembered it she recollected the Moffats—thought of the headstrong passionate nature for ever quiet, of the beauty and the obstinacy and the selfishness which should incense her no more—and began to wonder, at first in a vague intangible sort of way, but afterwards with sufficient clearness of mind and purpose, what Sir John would do now.

'The girls *must* have some one to chaperon them,' she considered; and, after all, might she still not be able to keep on the narrow house, and live almost constantly at Palace Gardens also?

There would be an indefiniteness—an absence of formal engagement—about such a plan which might commend itself to Sir John.

She had not thought of such a possibility before. Now it did enter her mind, Miss Banks was not one to go to sleep over it.

'I must send round Niel to inquire how they are,' she considered; 'or would it be better for me to step across to see Rachel? In the dark no one would know me. And yet perhaps I might meet

some person who would be surprised to see me out. No, I will write a note.'

Having arrived at which determination, she rang the bell, and desired that Niel might be sent to her.

'He is out, ma'am,' answered the cook.

'Tell me when he returns, then,' said Miss Banks; and she turned back to her contemplation of the fire with a frown. Life without the 'object's' income—without any income save that she could make—without a house, without servants, without Niel—would not, she felt, be much worth the having.

'And I can perceive a difference in Niel already,' she reflected. (Which indeed even a person less astute than Miss Banks might easily have done.) 'I wonder if he suspects how I am situated? He was not in the house when Mr. Lassils came last night, or I really should have imagined he had heard something of what passed. Dear, dear, what a plague servants are, even the best of them!'

If she had known what Niel the invaluable was doing at that very moment she might with justice have considered him a greater trial than the 'object' had ever been. He was standing near the trades-

men's entrance to Holyrood House, in close conversation with Mr. Simonds. Screened by sheltering evergreens, and perfectly secure from eavesdroppers by reason of knowing where every individual member of the household were bestowed, the pair talked about the late tragedy and the events which had preceded it.

'And what I say,' observed Miss Banks' right-hand man, 'is this—there is money to be made out of it, and I don't see why we should not make it as well as anybody else. What is wanted is to get up a controversy in the papers about this death. No one believes she came to her end fairly.'

'I'm sure she did not come to it unfairly,' retorted Simonds. 'You'll be saying presently I gave her the stuff, I suppose?'

'No; but as you remarked yourself a while ago, there have been queer goings-on in this establishment.'

'If you like to call it an establishment,' answered the butler, with a fine sneer. 'I never saw such ways of getting on before. Money spent like water, and nothing to show for it worth having. No great

perquisites to speak of. A wonderful set-out of company at first, and then all dropped except your Miss Banks as head-dish, and Mr. Woodham to match. My lady keeping her room half the time; and Sir John scarcely ever in the house so long as he could stay out of it. I am sure at one time I thought he was making a bolt of it, like Mr. Seaton. Now I believe there had been some terrible quarrel between him and my lady, and that that strange lady from the house higher up the Gardens had something to do with it.'

'That is exactly what ought to be ventilated,' said Niel eagerly. 'The way that inquest was hurried over cannot be considered other than a most disgraceful proceeding. It was a perfect hole-and-corner affair. Why, as a gentleman said to me no later than this morning, not a soul is a bit wiser on the subject of the Moffats than before Lady Moffat died.'

'They are a close lot,' agreed Mr. Simonds.

'Why, *you* know little or nothing about them,' suggested Niel, touching on what he was well aware to be a sore spot.

'Perhaps there is not much to know,' hazarded Simonds.

'And perhaps there may be. Look here,' went on the speaker impressively, 'when money is to be made why do you hold back your hand? I know the old woman was bribed to hold *her* tongue. Young Lassils came to our house last night, and made it well worth her while to keep silence. Now why should not it be made worth our while to speak out? There was something queer about my lady, and the whole establishment had not the true ring. If we just work that up a little it may be found expedient to give us something handsome. What do you say?'

'I can't say anything at the minute,' returned Simonds. 'You see there is the future to consider, and I must take time to think over the matter.'

'But while you are thinking time is slipping on and the chances are vanishing,' said Niel pathetically.

'What are your chances?' asked Simonds.

'O, if you choose to be cautious, I can be cautious too,' was the offended answer.

'All right. It is one of the Sunday papers, I suppose?'

Niel did not reply.

'You won't get much out of them,' suggested Simonds disparagingly.

'Never you mind how much, as you don't want to go shares,' said Niel, falling into the trap laid for him. 'I can only tell you that you are cutting yourself out of a nice thing—a very nice thing—by refusing to open your mouth.'

'If I did open it I should find little to say,' returned Simonds, whose mind was now quite made up. 'Except that my lady's temper was bad at times—that Sir John's ways were not quite the ways of what *I* should call a gentleman—I have nothing to say against the people or the place. The great fault I ever had to find with it was your mistress being let to come in and out of the house as if she owned it.'

'Take care she does not come over and stay in it altogether,' said Niel, with a jeering laugh. 'Now she has lost nearly all she had, Holyrood House might not be a bad sort of refuge.'

'I think the only person who had any liking for her cannot do much for her in the future,' answered Simonds. 'But what she tries or leaves untried does not signify much to me. I'll bid you good-evening now, as I may be wanted.'

Having ascertained that he was not wanted, or likely to be wanted for a couple of hours at all events, Simonds left Holyrood House, and walked direct to the residence of Mr. Lassils' mother. Arrived there, he found the gentleman of whom he was in search absent—dining, so said the trim parlour-maid, with Mr. Palthorpe in Palace Gardens. Thither Simonds repaired, and, stating where he came from, said he wished to speak to Mr. Lassils particularly.

'Well, Simonds,' said the young man, entering the little side-room where the butler had been told to wait, 'what is the matter at your place now?'

'I thought I had better see you, sir,' began Simonds. 'Sir John is a very reserved gentleman, and might take what I think some one ought to know amiss. Since I first went into service I have always made it a rule to stand by the family whose bread I eat. I consider that nothing but honest; and hear-

ing casually there is likely to be a stir made in some of the papers about her ladyship's death, I have taken the liberty of mentioning the matter to you.'

'What about her ladyship's death? and what more is there to be said about it than has been said?' asked Mr. Lassils sharply.

'Nothing, sir, that I know of; but it is wonderful what the newspaper gentlemen can spin out of the merest thread. So far as I understand, some remarks are going to be made about the inquest having been a hole-and-corner sort of affair.'

'But it was not,' interrupted Mr. Lassils.

'No, sir, of course not; and what I—who, of course, am acquainted with all the circumstances of the lamentable affair—was going to remark was, that I think it would be well—you'll excuse my freedom, sir—to take no notice whatever of any paragraph or article; and if any person wants any money either for giving or withholding information, to refuse to pay it. We in the house have nothing to tell, and when there is nothing to tell, it stands to reason remarks such as may appear will be forgotten after a very few days. If a statement appears headed "The

Mystery in Palace Gardens," it may be unpleasant, but it can't be helped. I thought you might be asked to buy a certain person off; so I took the liberty of seeing you. He knows nothing, and he can tell nothing.'

'There is nothing to know,' remarked Mr. Lassils.

'No, sir; that is what I observed a little while ago, if you remember. They were gentry as always kept their affairs to themselves. I never lived in a place before where the servants knew so little of what was going on.'

And having with solemn severity delivered himself of this—which might, indeed, be called a blow straight from the shoulder—Mr. Simonds coughed modestly and stood at ease.

Mr. Lassils looked at him; he looked at Mr. Lassils; and without another word being spoken they understood each other.

'It is very good indeed of you to give us this hint,' said Mr. Lassils, after that short pause.

'It was only my duty, sir,' answered Simonds, without changing a muscle.

'Sir John is the sort of person who would feel any gossip of that kind keenly,' remarked Miss Edwina's admirer.

'It is to be hoped it will never reach his ears, sir,' said Simonds, with imperturbable gravity.

'The family are not likely to see any of the Sunday papers, I suppose?' questioned Mr. Lassils.

'O, no, sir; always most correct in their reading,' was the answer.

'I hear,' went on Mr. Lassils, 'that, after everything is over and settled, Sir John has some intention of leaving Holyrood House, which must now, of course, be full of painful memories to him. If the establishment should be broken up, do you think of taking another situation?'

'Hardly, sir, I should say,' replied Simonds. 'My mother has a shop; and it was always my intention some day to abandon service, and try to work up a good business. I was only waiting till I had saved enough for the purpose.'

'And have you saved enough now?' asked Mr. Lassils.

'Pretty nearly, sir, I hope.'

'Well, if it should be in my power to give you a helping hand at any time, you may count upon my doing so.'

'I am sure you are very kind, sir.'

'Sir John is a liberal master, I suppose?'

'Pretty fair, sir. But sometimes I imagine it would be better for him and other people if he was acquainted with any one who could venture to tell him what was usual. Sir John is apt to treat his servants as he might his clerks; and I need not tell you, sir, the position is quite different.'

'Quite different. The members of a household are, after a fashion, members of a man's family.'

'That is exactly what I meant, sir. Only I could not have dared to put the idea into such plain words. Then that is all, I believe, sir, and I won't take the liberty of seeing you again, unless something very unexpected occurs. I thought Sir John's friends might like to know I had nothing whatever to tell.'

'Most considerate,' murmured Mr. Lassils. Then, when the door closed behind Simonds, he thought, 'O, these domestic spies—at bed and at

board, at birth, bridal, and burial! What is the secret of that house? What mystery was the dead woman guarding all her life? I wonder if Woodham knows. I should like to understand a puzzle which certainly exists, and which as certainly baffled the penetration even of Miss Banks.'

Meantime Sir John, utterly ignorant of the world's curiosity and the world's dissatisfaction, remained shut up in his library. How he passed the hours and the days no one knew; through what dreary labyrinths he wandered in imagination who could tell?

In the dead of night he had once looked on the face of the woman who was the ruin of his life; but how the sight of that marble visage affected him, of that countenance, in death no colder than her heart had been during life, there was none to know. At first Miss Aggles made an effort to approach him; but his repugnance to her well-meant words of comfort, his evident desire to be left to fight his battle in solitude, were so evident, she shrank out of his sight, and contented herself with striving to console the two lonely girls.

With Edwina her attempts were successful, but on Rachel she was able to produce no impression whatever. On the two words, 'papa,' 'mamma,' she rang the changes till Miss Aggles felt almost broken-hearted.

'If I could only be with papa,' she said; 'if he would let me talk to *him!*'

Knowing what she knew, Miss Aggles could scarcely bear to hear her. It seemed less hard to see the girl weeping beside her mother, or sitting, with hands clasped and eyes which were full of tears, looking over Kensington Park and the yews, that seemed gloomier and darker than ever.

'If I might only give her a hint!' thought Miss Aggles; but Sir John had sternly forbade any inkling of the truth being given to Rachel.

'That which has to be told I shall tell her myself,' he said.

And so the days wore on, and all that remained of the woman who had wrought such sorrow was laid in a large cemetery at some distance from London.

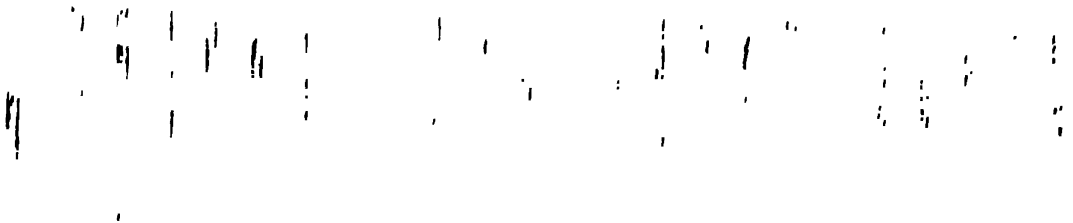
The funeral was strictly private. Sir John and

his sons, Doctor Dilton and Mr. Lassils, only accompanied her in that last journey. Then the man, who could not be called a widower, as he had never been a husband, addressed himself to setting his house in order. For Edwina and his sons he accepted an eager invitation sent by his youngest sister. Now his children might become intimate with his relatives. Now the bar he had so long placed between them might in silence and security be removed.

Over the papers of the woman who had called herself his wife he forced himself to look, finding amongst them, however, nothing the whole world might not have seen, save sundry bank-notes she had evidently lately begun to hoard. It seems a strange thing to say, but this discovery touched him keenly.

'She was afraid,' he said to Miss Aggles; 'poor soul, she was afraid, and thought I might leave her to want. Ah, she need not have feared *that*!'

'Never,' remarked Miss Winter afterwards, 'did I meet with such generous people. I had, I might say, the pick of my lady's wardrobe, and my fellow-servants the remainder. Not a single thing was reserved, except her jewelry; they gave every article



terious, except my lady's temper, which, after all, was perhaps just as good as Miss Banks'."'

'It is a scandal how those Radical papers are down upon gentlefolks,' said Simonds, who, always a Conservative, had developed a finer and keener spirit of Toryism since his connection with Mr. Lassils. 'Why, they wouldn't let a gentleman bury his wife in peace if they could help it.'

'Even Miss Banks was talking, with tears in her eyes, to me the other day about the dreadful things they had said,' remarked Winter.

'I daresay, the old crocodile,' commented Simonds.

'For all we know, crocodiles are sorry sometimes,' expostulated Winter.

'Very likely you are quite right, and that she is,' answered Simonds, who felt he had done a good thing in declining Niel's overtures.

CHAPTER XII.

A BITTER TRIAL.

THE hour had come. It was the evening of the last day Sir John Moffat ever meant to spend in Palace Gardens. Even to himself the paths of his future earthly pilgrimage seemed vague and uncertain; but he felt determined they should lead no longer round and about that ancient Court suburb. Next morning he intended to leave Holyrood House, and he did not purpose to return to it. If it could be sold just as it stood, well; if an offer were made for the place furnished, his agent had orders not to haggle about terms; supposing it could only be dealt with unfurnished, on lease or even a yearly tenancy, an auction of the various articles in which the dead woman had taken such pride was to solve the knot of any difficulty which might ensue.

'Such folly!' said Miss Banks, criticising the knight's proceedings freely, now she found there was

nothing more to be got out of him; for he had firmly declined all her proffers of friendship and assistance. 'Now he has got rid of her he might have a chance; and it is not as if he ever cared twopence about her; for nobody could—one of the most hateful women in private life that ever existed!'

'It is quite a mistake trying to lure people of that rank from their shops and counting-houses,' said Lady Griffiths, whose father had kept the Dancing Bear in the old coaching days, and made a mint of money by fleecing perished and starving travellers. 'Of course, you meant it all for the best, my dear; but you really are sometimes too credulous and impulsive.'

'I am afraid I am,' answered Miss Banks, thinking of the way Sir John received her overtures, and how he had even negatived the idea she could be of the slightest use to him.

'You see also,' pursued Lady Griffiths placidly, 'there was something most inexplicable about Lady Moffat's death. If they were living on good terms why should she have taken the chloral—why should it have been left in her way?'

If the law had been as stupid as society, as full of suspicion, as hard to convince, there cannot be the slightest question there must have been a second inquest, on the occasion of which, no doubt, something would have been dragged out concerning Lady Moffat's antecedents.

Well, suppose it had come to that, Sir John was prepared. In his life he had touched the point at which a man says, 'Better any exposure than the prolonged effort to conceal.' To Mr. Lassils he in fact said that, while appreciating his kindness, he doubted its wisdom, and that beyond the amount for which that gentleman had made himself liable he should decline to advance another sixpence.

'Let people or the papers say what they please,' he remarked; 'it cannot signify to me. I would rather face the exposure of any domestic trouble than the consequences of a bribed silence.'

'Plucky,' thought Mr. Lassils, 'but foolish. I wonder what precise nature the domestic trouble assumed?'

Her ladyship had been dead a month, and buried for three weeks. Already she was becoming a

memory. The mourning worn for her had lost its first freshness, and even the servants, on the eve of departure from Holyrood House, were forgetting her ill-humours, and referred to her, not unkindly, as their poor mistress.

As for Sir John, he must, after long years of servitude, have felt like the traditional prisoner of the Bastille, unable to realise his freedom. In a second the awful fetters himself had forged were struck off by death, only, however, to impose a more terrible punishment—the loss of Rachel!

For that trouble had now to be faced. It was impossible her father should longer defer his claim. Hitherto, out of pity for the man who had so wronged him, out of consideration for Miss Aggles, who implored delay, he forbore to insist that the daughter, who was a stranger to him, should at length be given into his care; but now he said he could wait no longer; that very night he would come to Holyrood House and take her to his own home.

'I do not want to be hard upon the man,' he said to Doctor Dilton; 'but she is my child, and it is not fit that she should remain under his roof.'

Sorrowfully Doctor Dilton agreed it was not fit; still he felt the terrible necessity of tearing the two apart. It was all part of the wrong, which could never be made right; never, while the sun shone by day and the moon gave her light by night.

Throughout Holyrood House there reigned a silence as profound as when Lady Moffat lay in her coffin. Save in the basement, no sound of human speech broke the stillness, and even amongst the servants there was less talk than might have been expected.

At last they realised the fact that it was an exceptionally good place they were leaving; that they might never be so comfortable again; that let the mystery, which they comprehended had shaded the house, be what it would, it failed to touch them, nay, perhaps made matters better for dependents than might have been the case where no secret trouble wrung the hearts of those set in authority over them.

Sir John had returned from the City early in the afternoon, asked for a cup of tea, and partaken of that simple stimulant in the dining-room. Rachel was in her own apartment, putting up such of her

simple possessions as had been left unpacked to the last, and wondering why it was no word had been spoken to her as to where they should next be opened.

It was the evening of a wild day in March. The wind swept across Kensington Gardens; masses of cloud kept hurrying across the sky; the sun was going down in a stormy, gray, and golden splendour.

'I shall always think of Kensington thus,' mused the girl, as she stood lonely beside the window, and she looked mournfully over the desolate landscape through a mist of unbidden tears. She did not draw down the blinds as twilight came darkling down, but, sitting beside the fire, still continued to gaze into the sombre sadness of the gathering night.

As she mused—and Heaven knows her thoughts were mournful as the aspect of external Nature—there sounded a light knock upon the panel of the door—light yet decided.

'Come in,' said the girl, changing her attitude a little, but not turning her head.

Slowly the handle was turned, slowly the door opened. Never had Winter in her most desponding

or sympathetic moments entered any apartment after such a fashion, and surprised, Rachel looked round and beheld, standing in the further gloom, Sir John.

Instantly she sprang to her feet and hurried to meet him. 'Papa!' she exclaimed, with a little sob of delight and pain; and she would have thrown herself upon his breast but that he stretched out his hand to keep her back, while, advancing into the room with a set look upon his face of one who had come on some fixed errand, he said,

'I want to talk to you, Rachel. May I sit down?'

Wondering at his tone and manner and expression, trembling with the terror of some unknown unimaginable danger strong upon her, she wheeled the easiest chair beside the hearth, and when he dropped into it stood, her hands clasped on the mantelpiece, waiting for what was to come next.

'You have bad news,' at last she said, finding he did not speak, and feeling the silence insupportable.

'For myself, yes,' he replied moodily; 'for you—

God grant what I have to say may prove good hereafter!'

'Nothing which is bad for you can be good for me,' she answered; and she meant what she said fully, though, as she spoke, her heart gave one great throb, thinking that, perhaps—ah, well, let that pass; she could not herself have analysed what she felt at the moment.

'I want to tell you a story, Rachel,' he went on, ignoring her remark. 'Sit down, dear; not beside me—that will do.'

What was coming—what could be coming? Something keener than the cutting wind, darker than the gathering night, more mournful than the dreary landscape. Something which had destroyed the happiness of a man's life, eaten the corn out of the ear, nipped off the fruit ere it set upon the tree, cankered the roses of existence before they could blossom into beauty and fragrance.

'It does not much signify how long ago,' he began, speaking to the leaping flame rather than to her, 'but before you were born, at any rate, a young man of good family married a girl beneath himself

in rank, but beautiful exceedingly. The marriage cost him everything men, as a rule, deem best worth having—money, station, worldly consideration.'

'Yes, papa,' Rachel said, as he paused. She breathed again freely. Let the story be what it would, it did not seem one that concerned them so nearly as in some vague intangible sort of way she had feared it might do.

'From most men, however, he differed. He thought love of more value than lands or money, or the homage of his fellows, and though he knew he had acted in what the world considered a foolish manner he felt content.'

'I am glad of that,' said the girl. 'Whoever he may have been he was right.'

'Do not interrupt me, Rachel,' entreated Sir John; 'on no account do that. I want to say what I must say as fast and as briefly as possible.'

She did not answer; she only folded her hands with a pretty gesture of patient attention, and looked inquiringly at the grave troubled face he turned towards her.

'The newly-married couple had no means of

living,' proceeded Sir John; 'so the young husband brought his wife to London and procured a situation, in which, by working hard, he managed to earn the bare necessaries of life. They were very poor, but I think, I believe they might have been very happy.'

Rachel made no comment, but there was a love-light in her eyes which told she at least thought, under certain circumstances, narrow means might not be incompatible with happiness.

'Even then, however,' pursued Sir John, 'in the early, early days of their wedded life, I fancy—I do not know for a certainty—but it seems to me probable the wife was discontented.'

'Ah!' Involuntarily, with a little gasping cry, Rachel spoke the word, but she added none other to it.

'They had a poor little house in the east of London,' he hurriedly proceeded, 'which he tried to beautify with such flowers as a man in his position could cultivate. They lived there on the money he earned, if not in affluence, at least quite above poverty; and what the future of their lives might have proved no one can say had not the husband

met with a dreadful accident. He was run over, crushed, fearfully injured, almost killed; but for the skill of a local doctor he must have died.'

For an instant Sir John paused. Out of the depths of memory that far-away time arose and stood beside him, touched his senses with the perfume and the glamour and the temptation of old. Again he inhaled the breath of that summer morning, looked at that shadowy figure seen dimly in the early twilight, the scent of the flowers floated around him, and then all faded away; and in their place naught remained save remorse and death and shame and sorrow.

'It does not matter now to tell the when and the how,' he continued, 'but whilst the young husband lay ill, by the purest accident a total stranger became acquainted with their circumstances, and tried to aid them. It is the most terrible thing in all the world, Rachel, for an old man like myself to talk to a young girl like you about such things, but the story has to be told. The pity this stranger believed he felt for the husband, and that he did truly feel, proved to be but secondary to the love

which had sprung up in his heart for the wife. Don't look at me so, child! O God, help me, how am I to go on to the end?'

'Do not try, papa,' she entreated. 'Only say if there is anything you want me to do because of these people. What were they to us? what were they to us?' and her question trailed off into a little moaning cry.

'You only make it harder for me, Rachel,' he said.

How bitterly cruelly hard it was he only fully realised when this innocent girl sat before him listening to words which seemed to blister his tongue as he uttered them. Love! Was a passion which could lead to such an end fit to be called by such a name?

'From the time he came to a knowledge of his own heart,' went on Sir John, 'he tried to escape, kept away from both husband and wife; but circumstances threw him once again across their path. He was asked to use his influence to obtain an appointment abroad for the man creeping back to health. There seemed to him safety in this direc-

tion; how was he to know the wife meant to remain behind?'

Rachel held her breath. Some vague notion of what was to follow dawned on her; but she did not speak; she only fastened her eyes upon the speaker as though she would have read his very heart.

'She would not go; her husband went alone to make a home for her in a strange land. She returned to the relations she had lived with before her marriage. Her grandfather was a farmer in Hampshire. At his house her child was born, a child whose father had lost everything, relinquished everything, for love of a woman who had no love to give any one. It was some months after that ere she and the stranger met again, not quite accidentally, since, though no letters had been exchanged or appointment made, he knew she was in that part of the country, and went down on the chance of seeing her. He meant no wrong even then. His sin consisted in blinding himself to the rocks on which he was drifting. Beside the sea they encountered each other. She was walking up and down on the sands, while the waves came gently in on the shore. She

was more beautiful than ever. Recognising him from afar, she ran to meet him with a cry of joy.'

He stopped short. In what words could a story like this be told, so as to make the sin excusable, the might of the temptation intelligible? No, it could not be done when the speaker was a man and the hearer a girl. Better to hurry on without excuse or delay to the terrible afterwards which ensued.

'There is but one end that can ever come to dallying with evil,' Sir John proceeded, after an instant's pause, 'and it came to them. Before six weeks had elapsed she had left her home, and he—he had forgotten his honour, his religion, and tied a millstone round his neck for life.'

'Don't go on, papa, do not!' she entreated. 'Why should I know all this? Is there any reason you should tell me about such fearful trouble?'

'Yes,' he answered, 'a good reason. I have not much more to say. For years they lived thus in sin; but the woman's relations knew nothing of what had occurred. They believed she was earning her bread as a milliner's assistant in London. Her husband also was perfectly ignorant of what had

occurred. At last tidings arrived that he was on his way home, and might be expected at any time.'

'Did he come?' asked the girl.

'The vessel by which he returned went down, and he was reported amongst the lost. Long, long before that time, whatever of affection existed upon the part of the man I have spoken of had been crushed out; but, now the woman was free, he made the only reparation in his power—he married her. He took the dead husband's child and brought it up as his own. At first he meant to do this as a mere matter of duty, as a salve to his conscience, which never ceased pricking him; but by degrees the child grew into his very heart. The love the mother never gave was lavished upon him without stint by one who was only his daughter by adoption.'

'Papa!' she rose wildly and all in a tremor, would have come closer to him, but that he once again put out his hands to keep her at arm's length, 'do not talk any more in stories. Who was that child—that daughter?'

His head drooped, his hands fell nerveless; but he did not answer.

'Was it I? O papa, papa, is it of me you were speaking?'

He only replied by a gesture; he was passing through the supreme agony of his life.

'And she—was the woman who could love no one my mother?'

Once again the mute sign of affirmative. Then, in an anguish of despair, she covered her young face with her hands, and sobbed out,

'And you—you! But tell me nothing more, if you would rather not.'

Her last words seemed to break a spell which had held him in silence.

'*I am the man,*' he answered, and though his voice was hoarse with emotion every syllable fell distinctly through the stillness of that quiet room. 'I was the false friend; it was I who led your mother astray from her allegiance; I who betrayed the truest noblest heart that ever beat in human bosom. I have no word to speak in excuse; my life, since I first saw her standing in the morning twilight, shadowed by foliage, surrounded by perfume, has been a long sin and a long sorrow. But sorrow

is not expiation—remorse, however keen and true it may be, never sufficient punishment for such guilt and treachery as mine.'

She did not speak for a moment; then, with a pitiful cry, she cast herself on the ground before him and said,

'But why have you told all this to me *now?* What was the need for me to know—ever—'

'There were times,' he replied, 'when I thought no one need ever know; till quite lately I hoped you, at least, might be kept in ignorance. As I saw you grow up to womanhood, I felt you would one day be loved and love; and when that day came I intended, if the lover were worthy, to tell him the story, and bury the secret in your husband's breast. He came, Rachel, long ago. He showed me his heart, and he then refused to learn that which I wished to tell him. He came again, just lately, to say he should never now be rich or titled, because his cousin was going to be married: but that he had got a good living, and could maintain you in such simple affluence as he believed would suffice.'

'And—then—you—told—him?'

Sir John had long before lifted her from the ground, and as she asked the question she stood, slight and fair and young, with the leaping firelight showing the trouble in her face, as she dropped the words out slowly, one by one.

'I told him this,' said Sir John firmly—'that you were not my daughter; that I had no right to dispose of your hand; that he must ask your own father to give you to him; and I added where that father was to be found.'

'What!'

She spoke but that single monosyllable, yet it reached the inmost recesses of Sir John's heart.

'Your father was not dead, though I believed him to be lying in the Atlantic Ocean; he is in England. Out of pity, he has hitherto had patience; but to-night the time he gave me to make this confession and to part with you expires. Even while I speak, Rachel, he is below, waiting to claim his child.'

'To claim me? do you mean me?' she asked.

'Yes, dear, you belong to him; I never ought to have had part or share in you. It has been hard for

me to tell you, but I could not bear that any other lips should proclaim my sin. And when you are happy, Rachel—a happy wife and mother—try to think kindly of the man who would cheerfully have died to keep from you the shame of knowing the misery and disgrace he wrought.'

She put out her hand and laid it firmly in his. She did not tremble or hesitate now.

'Did you say my father was here—in this house?' she inquired almost incredulously; indeed, to her it was all as some terrible and fantastic dream.

'Yes, Rachel, in the library. Go to him; but first bid me good-bye.'

'I will go to him,' she said softly; 'but I will not bid you good-bye *yet*.'

And, slipping her hand out of his clasp, she went firmly to the door, opened it, and walked to the top of the staircase.

For a moment she paused there, and then, turning aside, she entered her bedchamber, and, kneeling down in the darkness, prayed to her Father in heaven, where all is light.

'O Lord, help me!' It was her only petition;

but who that ever uttered the words in faith failed of receiving an answer to them?

She did not delay further; no grief, no prayer, no consideration prevented the swift progress of her light footsteps down the stairs, straight into the hall, across it without looking to right or left; then another instant, and she was in the library, looking at two gentlemen, who stood facing her. One was Doctor Dilton; the other—

'Father!' she said softly. She knew him: the face was familiar to her: it was the older, sterner, masculine reflection of that which had met her eyes every time she looked in the glass from childhood.

'Rachel!' and he would have taken her to his heart; but she drew back afraid, with the courage she had brought into the room oozing rapidly away; with a great horror upon her that she might fail to do what she desired as she wanted, to carry it out; with a sudden knowledge appalling her of the length and depth and breadth of the wrong which lay as a gulf between this man she had never known and the other she had loved all her life.

With frank kindly eyes, that held the memory of

a great trouble in their blue depths, he looked on her shrinking figure as he said,

'I am afraid this has come too suddenly upon you. It is not with my good-will the knowledge has been kept from you so long.'

'I wish it had not been,' she answered.

'So do I,' he agreed; 'but that cannot now be helped. Are you ready to come with me, or would you rather your aunt, Miss Aggles, fetched you?'

'I cannot go,' she said, with pleading pitiful entreaty; 'I cannot leave papa.'

'You mean Sir John Moffat,' suggested her father gently, though his brow contracted at the word she used. 'My child, you must not stay with him; you never ought to have been permitted to remain after I knew you were in existence.'

'He has been good to me always—how good you never can know,' she faltered.

'Yes, or I should have had an even heavier account to settle with him,' was the stern reply.

She felt powerless before him. He had the right on his side, and she could not gainsay it; but she had years of tenderness, of devotion, of such love as

real parents rarely bestow upon their own children, to remember, and she could not desert even the betrayer of her father in the hour of darkness and of need.

'Doctor Dilton,' she implored, 'speak for me! You know what he has been to me. No one ought to ask me to leave him.'

'I am afraid it is only right you should do so,' answered the doctor, twice essaying to pronounce his opinion before he made it audible.

She sat down in the nearest chair, and remained silent for a few moments; then having apparently made up her mind, she crossed to the mantelpiece and rang the bell.

'Ask Sir John—ask papa to come here at once, Simonds,' she said, when the butler answered her summons. 'I want him particularly.'

'You ought not to have done that, Rachel,' said her father, when the door closed behind Simonds. 'You will make this matter a very painful one to us all.'

'I think, Mr. Palthorpe, you had better leave it altogether in abeyance till to-morrow morning,' suggested Doctor Dilton.

'It has been left too long already,' answered Mr. Palthorpe; and drawing himself up to his full height, he waited gloomily for Sir John's appearance. Doctor Dilton also waited the events of the next ten minutes anxiously.

A longer pause ensued than any of the three had anticipated, but at length slow footsteps were heard crossing the marble pavement of the hall, and Sir John Moffat entered the library accompanied by Mr. Woodham. At sight of that gentleman, a dark frown gathered on Mr. Palthorpe's brow.

'I should have preferred,' he said pointedly, 'settling so essentially private a matter without the presence of witnesses.'

'I am here as the friend of all parties,' Mr. Woodham answered soothingly, the while his glance wandered to Doctor Dilton, who certainly could not be considered in the light of a principal.

'Do not break down,' he added, looking at Rachel's pale face and tortured expression. 'Say whatever you wish to say; your father will understand you.'

'I want to say,' she cried, in little gasping sobs,

rising as she spoke, and going close beside Sir John, 'that nothing, and no one on earth, shall ever separate me from you; that I love you as I never could learn to love any other father; that, though I am broken-hearted to hear about the sin and trouble and suffering, it makes no difference to me. I love you all the same. I can never love you less.'

There ensued a silence, dead, complete. Sir John broke it.

'Rachel,' he said, 'duty is duty, and right is right. By the affection I have borne you, I conjure you to obey your father's wishes without murmur now.'

'I cannot,' she answered passionately. 'If you were happy, if you had ever been happy, I might be able to do what you ask; but remembering what I remember, understanding all I now comprehend, how can I leave you?' and she broke into agonised weeping, shedding tears drawn from the fountains of past misery, as well as of present despair.

Involuntarily he put out his hand to touch her, and then remembering, drew it quickly back. Gray and worn and rugged, but with an infinite pathos pervading his sad face and quiet figure, he spoke to

her out of the depths of his very soul, telling her the time had come he always felt *must* come, when they would have to part.

'You never disobeyed me,' he finished, 'never once that I can recall. Obey me now. Go to the father who has suffered so much, and if you only prove half as great a blessing to him as you have done to me, he will have no cause of complaint.'

'I cannot,' she murmured. 'I will not give you up.'

'My child,' interposed Mr. Palthorpe, and his voice was full of the gentlest pity, 'if I could spare you this trial, I would; but it is not fitting you should remain here. Knowing what you have been told, you must not stop another night in this house.'

'That is true, Rachel,' said Sir John; and there was the simplest dignity in the way he thus pronounced his own condemnation.

'How can you ask me to do such a thing?' It was still to Sir John she appealed. 'How is it possible for me to look upon any one else as my father, to think of myself as daughter to another than yourself? O papa, papa, forgive me! Let me have a

little time, and I will try to do all you wish; but I cannot obey you now.'

'Is there no third course possible?' asked Mr. Woodham, turning to Mr. Palthorpe. 'Will you do what I asked you this morning, give your daughter to me? Rachel, will you trust me?' he added, suddenly addressing her. 'I have loved you ever since I knew you. If you can take my hand in trust and confidence, I think your father may not now, perhaps, refuse his consent.'

She looked at Sir John, whose eyes said 'Trust him,' though he remained persistently silent. Perhaps no part of his trial was harder than this—to see how, by no fault of her own, but only because of the sin of others, this tender loving creature was robbed of the most beautiful season the whole of a woman's life contains, the soft uncertain comings and goings of the sunshine in the love-lit time when dreamy shadows flit over existence, steeping every object and incident in rapturous and mysterious beauty.

But it was best so. Never afterwards could she have felt so grateful for his utterance, so ready to fly from the storms and troubles that had come upon

her, to the shelter offered, to the peace and security of an assured love.

She glanced at him shyly, and the tears brimming in her eyes forgot to fall; she saw his hand stretched out eagerly, yet, though longing to take it, hesitated.

'May I?' she asked her father.

'Say yes,' urged Doctor Dilton; 'it is the true solution of the whole difficulty.'

'It is not what I could have wished for you, Rachel,' said her father; 'but yet—'

With a tender grace she put forth her trembling fingers, and found them taken captive in a firm strong clasp.

'O!' she said, with a sobbing sigh; 'O!' It was like a child who, having been lost, finds itself safe at home again.

'I insist on one condition being observed,' said Mr. Palthorpe, 'namely, that you do not accept a sixpence of fortune from Sir John Moffat.'

'I want no fortune from any one,' said Mr. Woodham. 'I have enough for both.'

'I may stay here now, may I not?' asked Rachel timidly.

'No,' interposed Sir John. 'I leave this house for ever to-morrow, perhaps to-night.'

'You must come to me till you are married,' said her father. 'I shall ask your aunt to fetch you in an hour. Let us go now, Dilton;' and without further leave-taking he quitted the room.

Sir John would have followed their example, but Rachel stopped him with an eager impulse.

'Papa,' she began, 'dear, dear papa—'

'There are some matters I want to attend to at once,' he answered, with a meaning look towards Mr. Woodham. 'Let me go now; I will see you again;' and murmuring, 'God Almighty bless and make you happy,' Sir John left the lovers alone.

When, after the arrival of her aunt, Rachel later on inquired for him, she heard he was gone out, and knew he had meant this for leave-taking.

'I wish I could have seen him,' she whispered softly.

'Better not, dearest,' was Mr. Woodham's answer, 'better not yet;' and relying on his wisdom she crossed with him the threshold of Holyrood House, never to enter it again.

CHAPTER XIII.

CONCLUSION.

'Not even the Seatons,' decided Kensington, speaking by the mouths of several Mesdames Grundy; 'not even the Seatons compassed so complete a *fiasco* as the Moffats. The Seatons, at least, had some enjoyment of their splendid mansion—the Moffats none. The Seatons spent their money; Sir John Moffat might as well have flung his into the sea. The daughters married abominably badly; there was only one ball given in the house. They managed to get themselves and their doings talked about shockingly in the Radical papers. Even poor dear Miss Banks, after all her devotion to them, was treated scandalously. It was quite a pity ever to have known them at all; but, most fortunately, we knew very little of them.'

So Kensington wrote the epitaph of Sir John Moffat's social pretensions, and if Sir John had ard it he would have been more than content.

His own opinion coincided perfectly with that of the world into which he had been thrust. It was a pity to have had anything to do with it; a relief to have effected his escape.

Not merely from Kensington, but also from the City, he slipped quietly away. His sons succeeded him in his business, and were, as they grew older, to be met with on 'Change and before all the altars of Mammon and high places round and about Lombard-street; but Sir John's once familiar haunts knew him no more. Laying aside the ledger, he devoted himself to the ploughshare. He bought a property far away from London, near to a certain quiet vicarage, and there sought peace, and secured it.

There is nothing on earth so certain as that a wrong once committed can never be righted.

He knew that; knew if he gave his heart's blood he could never wash the stain of dishonour off his soul. Nevertheless, Time, the great soother, has worked, and is working, a marvellous transformation in him.

He is at times almost happy now. Released

from the incubus of a great burden, he moves through existence with something of the freedom and elasticity of his earlier youth.

Edwina and her husband live with him. Mr. Lassils having, as he himself said, a marvellous genius for doing nothing, and perceiving this to be a talent which might almost as easily seek its development in the country as in town, felt no hesitation in taking up his residence in the wilds of pastoral England.

He and his wife are happy enough, happier than married people often are; 'but if,' remarks Mr. Lassils, in confidence, to some old acquaintance, 'you would care to see Darby and Joan in the flesh, let me trot you down to the vicarage, and introduce you to my sister-in-law and the parish clergyman. I never saw such a pair. We laugh at them; but upon my word, you know, it is no laughing matter. People have no right to be so ridiculously fond of each other. A sweet woman! Ah, indeed, you may well say that. The world does not contain a sweeter truer woman.'

So Sir John believes, at any rate. True to her

word, she has never forsaken him; in all the wide world she is, perhaps, the only person who understands the penalty he paid for his misdoing, the harvest of trouble he insured for himself when, tempted by her mother's fair evil face—he fell.

Occasionally, but not often, she goes to Ravelsmede Hall, where her father, in his middle age, has found at last happiness and content. Where Mira Palthorpe stood in the morning sunlight sullen and envious, children play, and call a lady fit to be the mistress of Palthorpe's old home, mamma.

He is very happy; yet he has his dark hours too, when the memory of twenty years, taken by his own haste and folly out of the best part of his life, is almost more than he can bear; when Miss Aggles, who knows all his moods and tenses by heart, advises him to take a long rushing journey to Scotland or abroad, and exorcise the twin demons of recollection and unrest.

'And so you missed the heiress, after all, Mr. Lassils,' said Miss Banks to that gentleman, meeting him one day in the High-street of Kensington.

'E'en so, Miss Banks,' he answered.

'But no doubt you have done pretty nearly as well?'

'It is truly kind of you to take such an interest in my affairs.'

'You all live together, I hear. Sir John must be somewhat of a damper on your exuberant spirits, I should imagine.'

'Possibly we may in time mutually improve each other,' he answered.

'You, at all events, I suppose, understand all the ins and outs of "The Mystery in Palace Gardens," as people in Kensington like to style the late Lady Moffat.'

'I am not aware she was one, Miss Banks.'

'How cautious you are!'

'Not at all. Reticence with you would be quite misplaced.'

'And, really and truly, you mean to stand there and tell me you do not know who she was or what her antecedents?'

'Really and truly, I am prepared to stand anywhere and say, "I know nothing in the world about her!"'

'Nor who Rachel was?'

'Pray do not bring her name into our discussion.'

'I have nothing to say against *her*, you may be very sure of that—the only unselfish and generous and amiable member of the family.'

'On behalf of my wife, I thank you.'

'But then, to be sure, Rachel was not a Moffat at all.'

'Not a Moffat!' repeated Mr. Lassils, in genuine astonishment.

'No. When Mr. Woodham married her in that little out-of-the-way church in Norfolk, he did not take Rachel Moffat for better, for worse, but Rachel Palthorpe, daughter of Thomas Palthorpe, gentleman.'

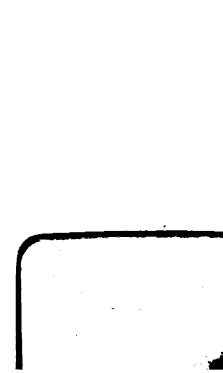
'How *did* you get to know that, Miss Banks?'

'Ah,' said Miss Banks, 'how indeed? I am poor, enough, but I spent a shilling to obtain the information at Somerset House; and I have never told a creature but yourself—never; and I never will, because I liked the girl. And she came to see me when she was in London after her marriage; and she said, in her pretty way, "Dear Miss Banks, I am so happy myself, I feel as if I wanted to make everybody else happy; but I cannot do much for any one.

Here is a little purse I bought in Paris; will you keep it for my sake? And do not be angry, please, at the trifle I have put in it, just to bring good fortune. I wish it were ten times as much." We walked together through Kensington Gardens after that, and she would go up the walk which commands a view of the back of the houses in Palace Gardens. "That is my dear old room, Miss Banks," she exclaimed. "I shall always love to think of it, though I was often so miserable there. I hope—O, I do hope—no young girl may ever again look over Kensington with such sorrowful eyes as I have often done."'

'I am not quite sure,' said Mr. Lassils to his wife, when he returned home, 'that I dislike Miss Banks so much as I thought I did.'

'I do,' retorted she who had been Edwina Moffat. But then she did not know all—she never knew.

THE END.

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